

ココロコネクト ヒトランダム

庵田定夏

ファミ通文庫

Sadonatsu Ando
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KOKORO-CONNECT HITO-RANDOM

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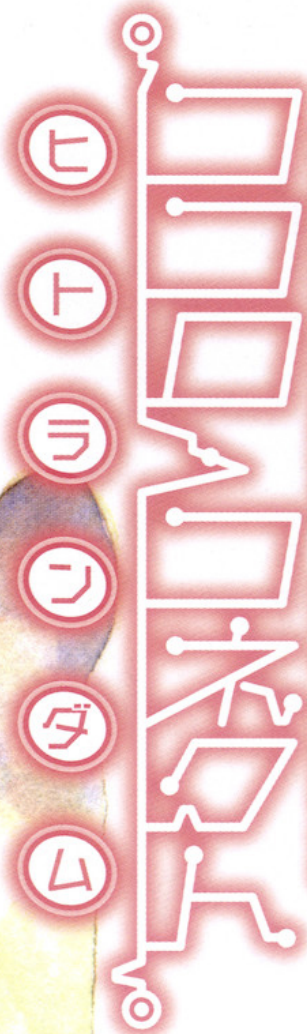
一九八八年生まれ大阪出身。
第11回えんため大賞特別賞受賞。大学三回生の「自分の人生どうしようか」と悩んでいる時期に同賞を受賞したため、尚更人生の方向性に迷うことになってしまった。……って書くと、まるで賞を取れたことがあんまり嬉しくないみたいに見えますけど、もちろん全然そんなことはないです。大変感謝しております、はい。

白身魚

Shiromizakana

繊細かつ柔らかな絵柄で知られる実力派イラストレーター。『14歳』『少年少女』というキーワードにひたすら弱く、小説では「カラフル」「アーモンド入りチョコレート」「ワルツ」、実写では「花とアリス」などが好き。冬になると猫二匹がお腹の上で眠るため寝返りがうてなくてちよっと困る今日この頃。

KOKORO-CONNECT HITO-RANDOM



「フリの割にボケが面白くない」

ながせ いおり
④ 永瀬伊織

いなば ひめこ
④ 稲葉姫子

きりやま ゆい
④ 桐山唯

1
日目

や え が し た い ち
④ 八重樫太一

「オレと唯が入れ替わってたんだ、マンガみてーに……だっ!!」

あおき ぶんぶん
④ 青木義文

二人のテンションは、これでもかというくらいアゲアゲ状態であった。
しかし、それは余りにも、迂闊だった。
扉の開く音が、した。



16日目

数秒の空白は必然であった。
そしてその空白を見逃すほど、文化研究部の女子陣の二人は甘くない。



「誰もわたしをわたしと気づいてくれなくなって……
わたし自身にもわからなくなって……
そんな……そんな風にして、
わたしはこの世から消えてしまうんじゃないかな」

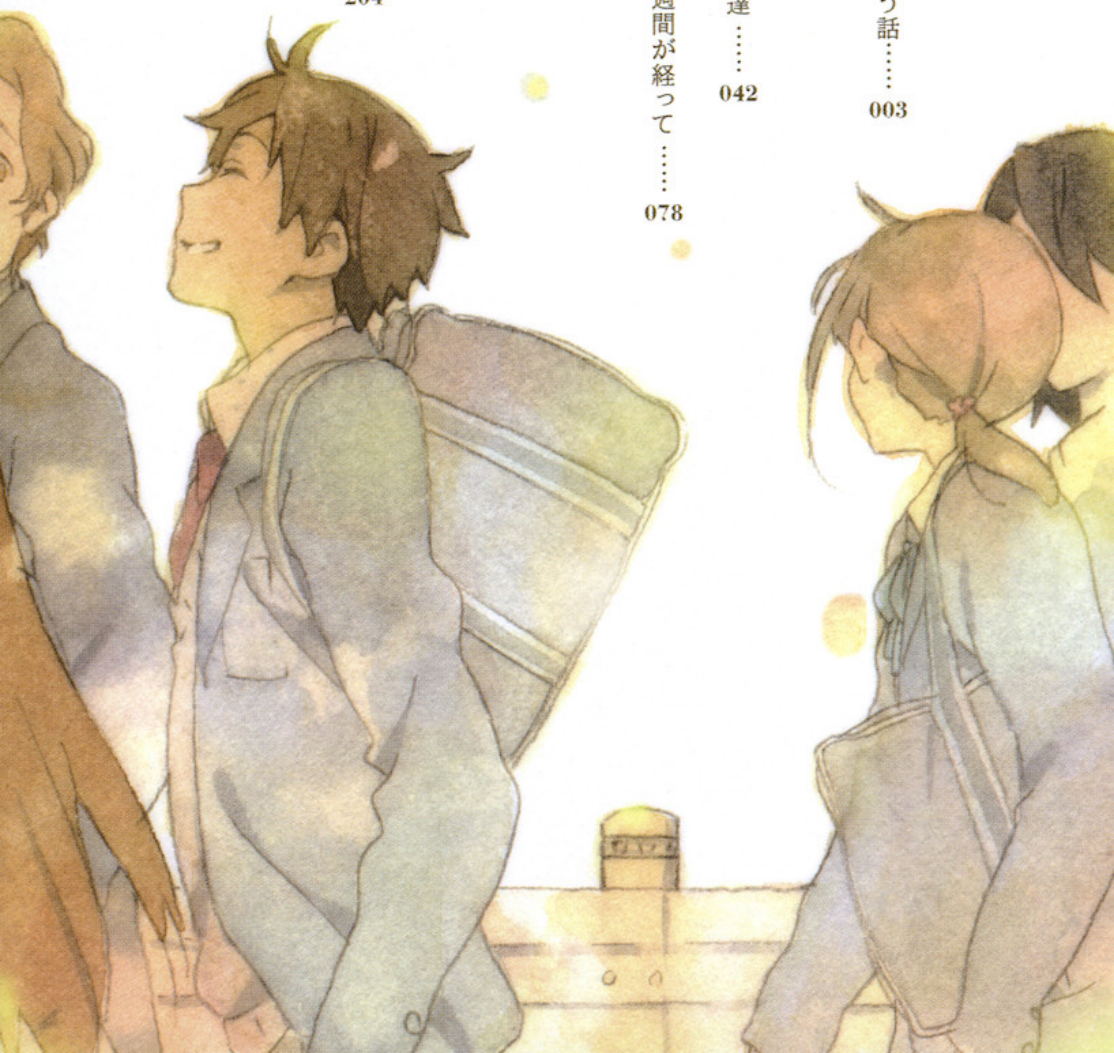
17日目

ハリボテで誤魔化し続け、
気づいたら元の形を失ってしまった永瀬の世界。
ぼろぼろと脆く崩れかかってもぎていたその世界に、
今回の『人格入れ替わり』という名の巨大地震は、
余りにも大き過ぎたようだ。

考えろ。
自分が今、永瀬のためにできることは——。

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Chapter 1 : By the Time We Realized It, It Had Already Begun.

September is a month where most Japanese high school students return to their normal lives from their exotic summer vacation.

Yamaboshi High School is situated in an appointed ordinance-designated city^[1]. The school is featured for its carefree learning environment whilst maintaining pretty good grades. Here, students are basically starting to settle down and return to their lessons. Nevertheless, in Yamaboshi High School, there is a cultural festival held annually at the start of September. Therefore, the school is always embraced in an overwhelming and elated atmosphere by the end of the cultural festival.

In the midst of September the atmosphere in the school fades away and is replaced by a calm, yet boisterous, commonplace school life.

Yaegashi Taichi is one of those people that lives a commonplace school life. In fact, it should be like this.

He didn't even sleep during all six of his lessons, so after finishing the restroom duties with his team he went to the recreation building.

He went from his own classroom, that is, class 1C in the East building, passed through the North building, then entered the recreation building. The four-story Recreation building has been predicted to collapse if repair work is still delayed. His destination is the fourth floor of the building. Of course, there are no lifts in the Recreation building so he must climb up the stairs to reach the top.

He is sent to this undesired location (High school students don't really care for beautiful scenery or good lighting. Not having to climb up the stairs is already the best option.) because of the fact that Taichi belongs to a club that was established just this year; and there are only five club members that make up this small club.

The club is called the Literature Study Club, which briefly studies the cultures of places around the world... if at all.

After climbing the stairs, he was a bit winded. Taichi looked at the words: "Literature Study Club" printed on an A4-sized paper, and headed into Room 401.

Wind blew from the open windows, gently brushing Taichi's cheeks and swaying his hair. When the fourth floor is reached, the ventilation becomes very good. It feels very cozy in this season.

There was already a club member in the room. Two long tables were placed in the center of the room. Literature Study Club's vice-president Inaba Himeko was sitting at the corner of a table, operating her own laptop computer.

"Oh Inaba, where are the other people?"

"See for yourself."

Inaba, not even checking Taichi's face, replied in a pretty low feminine voice.

Taichi sat on the folding chair and positioned himself towards Inaba. This was when Inaba finally lifted her head to look at Taichi.

As if shining in the darkness, her medium to long straight black hair seemed meticulously cared for. Lustrous, gleaming and supple, her fine dark hair would probably match very well with a kimono. Fringing those slender yet large eyes, her unusually long eyelashes gave her a mysterious sacrosanct aura.

Her mature appearance conveyed the impression that she was different from most other senior students. Along with her detached aura, it was easy to believe that she was a person hard to get along with.

"Taichi, have you gathered all the materials for the next issue of «Bunken News»?"

"Yeah, I just need to sort through some of the remaining data and we're good. By the way, 'History of Wrestling from the view a German Suplex' should really be from the view of the one taking the German suplex!"

"Be quiet."

"Eh? I thought you asked me first?"

"I asked you whether you have the information all sorted out and your answer should only be either 'yes' or 'no'. I didn't ask you about anything else and I don't want to hear about it."

"You're as blunt as ever. I think you should speak in euphemism... actually, I'm begging you to speak in euphemism."

After Taichi sat down, his eyes were level with Inaba's. Considering that Taichi's height is a bit taller than the average Senior boy, is it that Inaba is really tall? No, it was just because Inaba was sitting really straight; with her back so straight, that others can't help but wonder if there is any special

machinery behind her back. By the way, Inaba's legs are pretty slender and long. In fact, she is pretty tall compared to the girls. 'Slim and slender' are very suitable adjectives to describe her.

The door banged open, and a lively voice reverberated inside:

"What's up! Sorry I'm late."

Bright with glee, a smiling face brought forth some warm wind and light into the room. It was just that person standing there smiling. Notwithstanding, it brought the feeling that the flower-and-blossom blooming of spring had arrived.

"Hmm? Is it only Taichi and Inaba today?"

The one slightly tilting her head while murmuring was the Literature Study Club's president, Nagase Iori.

Taichi, Inaba and Nagase are all classmates in class 1C.

"Aw man, I even ran over here today — what a waste of energy."

Nagase complained, while jumping onto the torn black sofa inside the room. Then she raised her arm and rested her head on it, just like the aging men who watch TV during holidays would. Although she ran up the stairs, her breath seemed very calm and peaceful.

"Nagase, your panties are going to be in full view if you let your skirt ride up like that."

Inaba looked at Inori, calmly pointing out the problem.

"Who cares?"

Nagase showed a prodigious amount of her artistically white and slender legs while speaking. Despite what Inaba had mentioned, she didn't seem to care what others gazed at. She even slapped her thigh, making "pat, pat" sounds.

"I'm here too, you know."

This time, Taichi spoke.

"120 yen a peek."

"I have to pay?! Well, that sounds fair..."

"Taichi, you realize what you just said there was borderline illegal, right? You should quit while you're ahead."

Inaba responded with a sharp-tongue reply.

Nagase giggled like a child who succeeded in mischief, and sat herself back down on the sofa.

She has big brilliant eyes with double eyelids, a straight-bridged nose, and a slightly oval proper face that did not have any trace of make-up. In spite of this, her white and permeable skin was supple. Slightly falling towards her shoulders, her thin smooth hair that was as fine as silk didn't seem to have any substance to it, and was just flatly tied up behind her head.

Although Nagase did not look like she had any make-up on, this emphasized her pure cuteness. This made others feel that staying the way she was would make her more beautiful.

"Oh yeah. Nagase, what are we doing for our next issue?"

Taichi asked.

"Hmm...Actually I was just thinking about what the «Bunken News» lacks."

"Then...?"

"My conclusion is, because Inaba is responsible for the scandals, I can be assured that this suggestion will be taken. What we are lacking is violence and sex."

"Who will look for that kind of stuff in a newspaper?! In fact, we're straying from what a newspaper is just by having negative articles."

In the last issue of «Bunken News», Inaba exposed two teachers having a relationship between colleagues (source unknown). Consequently, in this year's Cultural Festival, the club that people should ignore had the chance to squeeze in other diverse activities, and became the talk of the town. Amongst the festival's buzzing atmosphere, the two teachers later even proposed at the night festival.

To sum up, the atmosphere then was very energized. Including other teachers, everyone was stirring up a congratulatory atmosphere towards the two teachers. Although it was said to be a wonderful ending, there was too much high tension when having a relationship in front of everyone. It would be impossible to imagine how embarrassing it would be if they should break up. This aspect is very worrisome in Yamaboshi High School.

"Well, that article was exclusive to the school festival, so I don't plan to write that kind of article at this moment. Besides, I hate to expose information that I have acquired. That time was just a sudden impulse."

Inaba Himeko's hobby is collecting information and analyzing it. (Though she hates to make it public.)

Where would she have used all that information? This question stirs up curiosity.

"Alright, let's use that impulsiveness and challenge ourselves by writing an ero article!"

Nagase said, giving a thumbs up.

"Don't try to pressure a pure freshman girl to write sex articles."

Inaba replied, though her face didn't show any timidity resembling that of a pure freshman girl.

"Don't worry, I'll be in charge for this one! So if Inaba would let me take a few high tension erotica photos then..."

"There's no way I'd be fine with that! Why do I need to provide you with materials that boys would use to deal with their sexual desires!?"

"Inaba's idea of 'what are the sexual boundaries for being approved to be published in a school magazine?' makes me curious..."

Regardless of whether Inaba could hear him or not, Taichi continued to murmur to himself.

Based on her tone, it seems that her imagination is quite sexual, enough for others to rebuke her claim that she is a pure freshman girl.

"Yeah, Nagase, you look like a prettier girl than me, it would be more suitable to take photos of you instead."

Inaba concluded, looking as if she had thought deeply for a while.

"No way. That's because I am an idol type who cannot strip. Although my cuteness gives me an advantage, if you want something really erotic, Inaba would be best."

"These two people... they are completely considering stripping."

Because Nagase looked like she didn't perk up herself, it seems that she doesn't really care much about her appearance; however, she by chance is actually analyzing her own advantage. It feels like no make-up on is just a tactic to 'make herself seem more of the smart-type'.

The correct answer, however, might be that she hasn't even thought about it.

"I understand... But before that, why do we need an erotic appeal? I feel that high school boys don't have those desires. In common sense, refreshing types will be more popular."

Inaba spoke.

"Nope, considering highschoolers nowadays, mature and erotic kind of people are surprisingly popular... according to my instincts."

"Instincts, huh?"

Taichi responded to Nagase with a sharp-tongue reply in a low voice. Then the two girls turned their sight to Taichi.

"Speaking of which, don't we have a high school boy right here? What kind of girl do you prefer Taichi?"

Inaba asked.

"Yeah, if you were to choose, who do you want to see stripping? Inaba or me?"

Nagase's question was completely off the track.

All in all, there must be an answer? With this in mind, Taichi closed his eyes and meditated for a few seconds, and then he replied.

"Well, on behalf of all the high school boys, I would say 'Both if possible'..."

Just when he spoke those words, Nagase chipped in.

"3:55pm. Yaegashi Taichi told two female members of the Literature Club to strip... Did you get all of that, Inaba?"

"Of course, we'll put it in this issue's editorial."

Inaba smiled wickedly while typing.

"Umm... I actually did say that, so I can't refute it."

No matter how hard he tried, Taichi can't outwit them with words. He sorrowfully drooped his head, re-acknowledging the strong and weak powers in the club.

After that, Nagase started to read manga, while Inaba faced the computer and Taichi prepared for tomorrow's lessons. The three continued in a relax manner for the next 30 minutes. Today is the day where five club members have agreed to get together for discussion; however, two members have not yet come.

"Speaking of which, Aoki seemed a bit weird when we were having PE lesson today..."

Taichi suddenly stopped his pen, only murmuring to himself, without expecting a reply. Even though Aoki is in a class different from Taichi, he would be together with Taichi in PE lessons because PE lessons are conducted with two classes together.

Inaba commented with a thoughtful gaze:

"Yui wasn't acting like herself at gym class today either."

"Is that so... maybe something happened? You think Aoki finally hooked up with her?"

"Impossible. Looking at the situation at hand, even if Aoki spent a lifetime trying, they wouldn't be in a relationship. Only if Aoki would become aware of the things he's left out, then there would be a chance."

Just as Taichi and Nagase had begun talking about the two that were absent, the door squeaked lightly as it was pushed open.

The two missing club members, Aoki Yoshifumi and Kiriya Yui, staggered into the room from the entrance.

Aoki's hair is somewhat long and curled. He always has an adorable (if negative that is light-hearted) smile. He gives the impression that he is lazy but easy to talk to (this, the same, if negative, is frivolous). He is also tall and thin, having the figure of a literature teenager.

Kiriya's hair, depending on the brightness shining on her, will usually have a pretty bright and chestnut hue. Her hair is also supple and lustrous; her erect eyelashes are tilted slightly upwards and her eyes are really stern. Although she has a small figure, her figure is not of a child, and it is obvious

that she has been exercising. This is because she has a flexible and firm body. Overall, she is a lively character.

The two really match in appearances, as both are normally quite cheerful.

For no apparent reason, however, they didn't seem to have any vitality today. Their appearances were completely weak.

Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba sat on one side of the table while Aoki and Kiriyaama sat on the opposite.

"So... Um... What happened to you two?"

Nagase commenced the inquiries in this indescribably heavy atmosphere.

"Eh... I am planning to say this alright, but how do I put this..."

Aoki scratched his hair, as he hesitantly began speaking. Even though he normally wears his uniform deliberately messily, it looked particularly dishevelled today.

Beside him, Kiriyaama hung her head and looked at the corner of the table while meaninglessly fidgeting with her hair.

"What's with you two? If there are any problems, you should tell us. We can help you to some extent!"

Taichi urged them to speak.

"Oh, that's relieving... Hmm! Ok! Then we'll start! Although the two of us have decided to tell you now, it is quite a difficult thing to try and explain. So it will take a lot of confidence to really tell you about this—"

"Tell us!"

Inaba interrupted him in a sharp voice.

Aoki was a bit frightened. He nodded and replied, "Yes, yes!" No matter what the opponent's status was, Inaba never shows mercy.

Aoki deeply inhaled and sought confirmation from Kiriya's face. Although Kiriya looked quite reluctant in the matter, she still nodded to show consent. After confirming, Aoki recommenced his speech,

"Actually last night we..."

Everyone held their breath. The whole room was silent. Aoki kept them in suspense, and allowed that silence to spread in the room. Then...

"Our souls were exchanged!"

He shouted.

"What?"

Inaba spoke.

"Eh?"

Taichi spoke.

"Hahahaha.... ah?"

Nagase spoke.

There were three simultaneous responses. To sum it up, they all expressed surprise.

"Like I said, Yui and I switched our souls, as if in a manga... Ouch!"

"Ohoh, straight strike to the head with a hand blade."

Taichi was quite impressed with the accuracy and sharpness of Inaba's strike.

"What did you do that for, Inaba?!"

"It's sad how you are so into it, but this joke is totally boring."

"That's not it! I am not kidding. I am very serious!"

"Compared to leaving a dead silence after joking when everyone was so highly-expectant, being assaulted by Inaba is much more dramatic."

Taichi said in a low voice.

"Besides, if your souls were really exchanged, right now Aoki should really be Yui? However you speak, your words always sound dumb. Also, your block-headedness hasn't changed much."

"That's why I described the 'exchange' in past tense. We've returned to normal now! Also, Iori, don't be so blunt! Didn't school teach you that verbal violence without constraint is the most dangerous?"

After that, Aoki, with an indescribable exaggerated pose, endeavoured to persuade others that 'Kiryama and he did exchange souls'. Although that endeavouring spirit did spread out, what he said was too absurd. Taichi and the others only felt puzzled.

"Right, I understand what you mean... Jeez! Then what does Yui have to say? Aoki said his soul was with you."

Inaba inquired to Kiriyama, who had not yet spoken, but had a troubled face.

Yui held her head and looked downwards. She swayed her head as if she couldn't accept the truth. When her usual combed bright chestnut hair had degenerated into a mess, she decided to open her long-closed lips.

"... Of course that's not true. How can something like this happen in reality? Isn't this very strange? For Aoki to become me, and me to become Aoki... Yeah, there's no way!" As she spoke, her voice amplified like a crescendo, and then she violently stood up and declared:

"That was just a nightmare!"

Kiriyama posed in a fighting stance that could almost be dubbed with a 'Pong' sound.

"I don't believe in supernatural things that can't be explained with science! Yup, that's what I've decided. So stop dragging me into your crazy fantasies, Aoki! Soul exchange? Occult things like that are so yesterday."

"I, I am betrayed! Didn't we confirm this together just now?"

"I was just confused! My level of judgement was zero back then!"

"Even though I don't really understand, I think that's a cool way to turn hostile."

Still, Taichi spoke even when he thought it was unnecessary.

"Are you saying that it was only a dream?"

"That's right! It was just more realistic than usual! Come on, Aoki, you should wake up already!"

Yui's face turned a bit strange, like entering anger mode.

"... Then what you mean is, we had the same dream, and we felt 'soul exchange' with the same time cognition; and even though we haven't been in each other's rooms, we could see the room of one another perfectly; and when I switched to Yui, the things I moved in her room were also moved in the real world coincidentally?"

"That's just what happens when coincidence upon coincidence are stacked together! Yeah, in other words it's a miracle!"

"So you're saying that it's a miracle that caused our souls to be exchanged—"

"Why does it have to be Aoki and I!"

Yui roared as if she were to die.

"Yeah, is it so? Should we call it destiny or fate? So I say, we should go along with the will of the world. Ah~~"

"How did you jump to those conclusions?"

Taichi gave a sharp-tongued reply even though those involved didn't hear him.

"Eeeerrrrghh! It is because you say these things that I hate you so much!"

Kiriyama trembled fiercely while returning back to the corner of the room.

"So what actually happened to you two? If it's strange fantasies or illusions, I can still hear your story."

Inaba murmured such words that sounded utterly strange.

"There's no need of that, Inaba! That's because the souls of Aoki and I have never exchanged! If I exchanged with Iori then that is fine. But if it's Aoki, I will never confess! Firm refute! Complete refusal! Denied! There's no chance it happened!"

"That pervert wants to force his disgusting fantasies on me!" Kiriyaama cried, while jumping on Nagase. Nagase, as if stroking a bothered dog, stroked Kiriyaama's back, and said, "Clever, clever, don't cry."

"Eh? The reason for her not confessing is because she wants to target me...?"

Aoki dropped his shoulders like he was deeply shocked. Taichi told him not to take it too seriously. Although it is not like something could have really happened, Aoki's dismal state was clear to Taichi.

Anyway, Aoki and Kiriyaama continued their 'souls were exchanged yesterday' and 'weren't exchanged' squabbling.

Just when Taichi and Nagase tried to take this opportunity to try to casually discuss 'Did they eat something bad?' Inaba finally spoke out violently.

"Anyways, everyone go and cool off for a while. Club dismissed!"

Because of the vice-president's call, the regular club meeting was decided to delay until tomorrow.

Chapter 2 : 'That' was Started from 'th'

To hold the delayed club meeting, the Literature club members hurried to the clubroom. Of course, Taichi was one of these members.

The five club members sat around the rectangular table. Although an embarrassed atmosphere could still be felt from Aoki Yoshifumi and Kiriya Yui today, at least they were obedient and kept silent.

Taichi hadn't yet touched on yesterday's matter because it felt that the matter had become quite sensitive. The atmosphere was rather stiff within room 401 of the recreation building.

Vice-president Inaba Himeko paid no attention to the terrible atmosphere and decided to start the meeting.

"Geez! Let's start our club meeting! First—"

"Ah! I left something in the classroom."

The president, Nagase Iori suddenly interrupted the procedures.

"Hmm! Just when I extraordinarily want to seriously hold a meeting you pour cold water on me!"

Inaba was getting exasperated.

"Inaba-chan, calm down, get a hold of yourself~~"

"You know you are the cause of this, don't you?"

"Then, Inaba-chan, can I go get that now?"

An innocent childish smile was drawn on Inaba. Her hair that was bundled behind her head looked like it was hopping and jumping...Of course this couldn't possibly have happened.

"Get those kinds of things later...No, forget it, you go get it...fast."

"Yes, sir~ ! "

"I'm not a sir... She's not listening, right."

Without waiting for Inaba to finish, Nagase had already rushed out of the clubroom.

"Haha, even Inaba can't take Nagase."

After arriving to the club, a relieved Kiriya spoke for the first time.

"Although it's not to the point that I can't really take her...still, it might be intractable."

Inaba sighed.

The atmosphere seemed to have cooled down.

With this, Aoki returned to his normal state and started to joke around pointlessly. Kiriya and Taichi responded with sharp-tongue replies.

The clubroom was returning to its normal temperature.

"...It felt that girl did that because she felt this mood, that's why I think it's intractable."

At the moment when Inaba's low voice words were transferred to Taichi's ear...

—The world became pitch black.

When he regained his senses, the world had become horizontal.

...Nope, that should be because I am lying horizontal myself - Taichi immediately thought of a really ideal answer.

He wasn't sitting on the chair that he was on a while ago . Moreover, his face was stuck firmly on a table.

He got up and looked around.

A classroom.

Not the clubroom.

No one here. Shouting sounds of some club practising came from the court. There were also batting sounds.

Taichi felt a bit dizzy. He held on to the table to stabilize his body. His view wasn't quite coordinated...Is it because of the dizziness? No, it seemed there was a more significant reason behind this.

I should be in the clubroom on the fourth floor of the recreation building right now. And I am convinced of it because until now I was still talking with Inaba and the others. With no reason, however, I am in the classroom at this moment.

Did something happen?

To grasp the situation, Taichi looked around the classroom again.

The way the tables were organized, the posters on the board, the contacts written on the corner of the blackboard, and the little bookshelf on the edge of the classroom—everything was familiar to Taichi.

In other words, this is Taichi's class, 1C.

If he were to have come from the clubroom, no matter how hard he tried, he would at the very least need a few minutes.

Taichi trembled lightly; He felt something bad was going to happen.

Is it that I teleported to the classroom from the clubroom instantaneously?
Or is it that I walked to the classroom myself, but because of some procedures, memory has faded? Or is it that the time I was in the clubroom was just a dream and I was just having a nap in the classroom the whole time? Or is it...something else?

"So actually what is it...eh?"

That was too impulsive.

Taichi was so shocked that his whole body trembled while he held his hand beside his mouth.

"...You're kidding."

As he spoke in a low voice, he moved his hand to his neck.

He couldn't even feel the prominence of his Adam's apple in his neck. His neck was as smooth as that of a girl.

I should have misheard. Taichi tried in his heart to refute the voice that popped from his mouth. Although he tried to, he couldn't. His rational side told him he didn't mishear.

"Why did my voice become as smooth as that of a girl?"

Is this a dream?

No, this couldn't possibly be...this feeling and texture must not be that of a dream, but instead, of reality.

Calm down. Taichi repeated these two words in his heart. He tried to control his fantasies from swaying to strange directions. However hard he tried, his fantasies were impossible to control or stop.

Aoki's words from yesterday flashed through his mind.

In any case, not confirming it would not get him anywhere. So Taichi inhaled deeply and after exhaling, he slowly looked towards his feet.

From his waist to his knee, there was a cloth, cylindrical in shape. Looking objectively, this resembled a piece of clothing that females would wear...in other words, they were covered by a skirt.

Then at the bottom of the skirt, he could see a hint of the white and slender thighs. Looking further down revealed a pair of soft legs covered with black knee socks.

"Arghh—!" Taichi cried. But that was not Taichi's voice...No, shouldn't we now say this voice is Taichi's?

Taichi drooped his head and used his hands to pull at the 'thing' covering his upper body for confirmation.

Undoubtedly, that was Yamaboshi high school's uniform. The only thing was that...it was the female uniform.

Taichi was very confused.

He couldn't grasp the present condition, situation and plight.

No, to speak correctly, 'it wouldn't be that.' Such a kind of conclusion brought along an overwhelming existence that floated in his mind. Even so, a consciousness long developed in human manners was continuing to boil in his mind and trying to veil his sudden conclusion.

Reality, however, brutally forced itself upon Taichi's eyes.

If he is a man, he being Taichi, then that would never exist...that object, which had appeared in front of Taichi at the very start.

Taichi's chest had expanded.

That degree couldn't possibly be inflammation. No matter how strong a force his chest was subjected to, this kind of expansion was obviously not the kind that a boy's pectoral muscles would provide.

Undoubtedly, this should originally belong to a woman, this is, 'that' which started from 'th'.

If this is the real thing, he must acknowledge "this is what happened".

Taichi nervously swallowed his saliva in an effort to calm himself down.

Then he finally decided to hold his hands in front of his chest and used his right hand to grasp the right hill and his left hand to grasp the left hill. Then he started rubbing them.

Rub, rub, rub, rub...

Even though it was so supple as if to melt, it was quite firm and elastic at the same time. It was as though it felt that it would slip out between his fingers but at the same time it absolutely wouldn't. This was an indescribable and amazing sensation.

This in fact is an unknown experience. Although Taichi hadn't touched the real thing in his sixteen years of life, he believed it wholeheartedly.

—This must be the real thing, 'that' that started from 'th'.

And every time he rubbed 'that' from 'th', he could feel that sensation. In other words, this was not just a decoration stuck on his body—just when Taichi started to think like this...

A *click* came from the classroom door, and was opened. The person entering the classroom met her eyes with Taichi.

The condition now had already made Taichi dizzy, to the point where he could not respond to this unexpected new development.

Keeping rigidly in the same pose as she walked, was a person who held her silky hair behind her, and wore a trademark pair of glasses—Fujishima Maiko, class president of class 1C.

Staring at each other silently for a few seconds, Fujishima started to speak slowly.

"I am...that...I saw the windows of the classroom was open, so I returned to close them. That's because the weather forecast said that it may rain tonight...Then, [Nagase-san], what...are you doing?"

—Fujishima called Taichi [Nagase].

He should be Yaegashi Taichi and not [Nagase], but now is he [Nagase Iori]?

"If I were to tell you what I saw, you looked like you were rubbing your own breast..."

Having been told this by Fujishima, Taichi then realized he was still clinching his breast with his hands. He hurriedly unclenched of his hands. Although he felt that his brain couldn't operate because of insufficient storage, he still understood how bad the situation was.

"..."

"..."

Fujishima eyed Taichi and widened her pupil behind her glasses to have a good look at Taichi. Taichi couldn't escape. He could only stand rigidly.

Deep silence spread in the room.

But Fujishima quickly tackled it with an unpredictable question.

"Do you want me to help you to rub them?"

"...Eh?"

What development was this?

"So I say, rather than doing it yourself, wouldn't it be better for someone to rub it for you? On multiple levels."

"No, no need."

Although the part 'on multiple levels' was quite interesting, Taichi still rejected the offer.

"You don't have to hold back. I have some confidence when it comes to this."

Fujishima stepped forward.

"Fuji, Fujishima?"

Fujishima seemed to have been turned on by a miraculous switch.

The class president, who was normally a model student, had an erotic expression on her face for the first time, which caused Taichi to be uncertain about what to do.

Fujishima gradually approached Taichi.

Maybe this is crisis of virginity? In this condition, however, who is the owner of the virginity...No, these things aren't worth thinking now. Taichi began to panic.

"You, you should first calm down, Fujishima! If we calm down and talk, we could understand each other correctly!"

"Yeah, so let us talk...using our bodies!"

"Bo...Bodies? Wa...Wait!"

Actually, what really happened that resulted in this condition?

Taichi couldn't grasp the force that caused this.

Now another person rushed into the classroom with surprising momentum.

"Tai—Chi!"



Breathing heavily and screaming was the person—[Yaegashi Taichi]...No wait, it should be "someone with the body of Yaegashi Taichi", right?

Taichi used his still puzzled mind to predict any possibilities.

Fujishima called Taichi as [Nagase]...Then, if not neglecting those supernatural phenomena, thinking everything straightforwardly, the person now moving and entering the classroom in [Taichi's body] should be Nagase?

"Yae, [Yaegashi-kun]?"

Suddenly rushing in, [Taichi] caught Fujishima in a tight corner.

"Fujishima-san! If you need to talk to Taichi...No, that's me...no, need to talk to [Nagase Iori], then, sorry! Because of emergency situations, I need to bring her away! Ok. Now come with me!"

The person now moving as [Taichi], who was most likely [Nagase], came beside Taichi and pulled his hand, planning to bring him out.

At this moment, Fujishima grabbed Taichi's other hand.

"Wha...What's the matter? [Yaegashi Taichi]? Don't you see we are doing something important now?"

"Right, something serious almost happened! Let me go, Fujishima! I have to go!"

Taichi [Nagase] said.

"Look, that's even what Taichi...Nope, that's even what [Nagase] is saying!"

Nagase [Taichi] said.

"Why do the tones you guys are using seem so weird? Anyways, if you want to bring Nagase-san away, give me a good reason!"

Fujishima still showed a sign of rejection.

"Hmm, then have a taste of this!"

Nagase [Taichi] jumped on Fujishima as she cried.

"Tickle, Tickle, Tickle..."

"Eh, ah, stop it...! My abdomen can't take it...Hahaha. And [Yaegashi Taichi], what you are doing now is sex, sexual harassment...Ahahaha, stop, stop please..."

Class 1C's classroom sunk into sharp cries from hell.



"So, what kind of prank are you trying to pull this time?"

Inaba eyed Taichi and the others with cold eyes.

[Taichi] and [Nagase], having returned to the clubroom, immediately confirmed their status together. Although they screamed at their faces in the mirror during the process, and were caught into a mess, they had now already calmed down.

According to Nagase, she was in the classroom when her vision suddenly became pitch black. Then, when she got back on her feet, she was already in

the clubroom facing Inaba and the others. By the way, according to those who witnessed the situation (Inaba and the others), [Taichi's body] who was originally sitting suddenly vibrantly fell forwards as though losing consciousness, then bent up his body again at the next instant.

Then Nagase temporarily fell into a flurry; however, she remembered Aoki's words from yesterday and thought, "Won't it be a similar condition?". With that in mind, she flew to the classroom where [Nagase] was...this should be what happened up till now.

"Ah...rather than souls, it seems more like Taichi and my personalities were exchanged!"

Ahaha...Nagase [Taichi] spoke in an unbelievable swift tone and cheerfully laughed.

"Tai, Taichi having such a refreshing smile is kind of rare? His laughs normally are quite twisted."

Kiriyama, surprised, blinked her eyes as she spoke in a low voice.

"Yes. Rather speaking, his appearance is not bad. If he smiled like that all the time, he might be loved by many girls!"

Aoki also chimed in with them.

"Is my smile really that bad...? I think I'm just smiling normally..."

"...Those things don't really matter! Don't change the subject!"

A "Pong" could be heard as Inaba struck the table with her fist.

"—Ouch..."

"That strike just then, must have really hurt?"

"Taichi, would you please..."

Inaba planned to strike a deathblow at Taichi [Nagase].

"Stop talking..."

But just before hitting him, she turned over her body and let her sweeping side punch^[2] to deviate from the track to hit Taichi. Posing like a Ballet dancer, she held out her hands and remained still on her feet. Her face continued to twitch, not knowing was it owing to shame or anger.

"Inaba looks quite happy!"

Nagase [Taichi] ferociously struck a deathblow.

"I think this is just what happened—Inaba was attacked by Taichi's skilled unwanted sharp-tongue responses and wanted to strike back at Taichi with physical attacks as usual; but found out that his appearance is Nagase...then she stopped herself midway."

"Inaba was even criticized by boys like Aoki, how sad..."

Aoki and KiriYama passed the baton and described Inaba dismally.

Inaba twitched her face, but still kept a good pose, as if deep breathing autonomously.

"This is the first time I've seen such an interesting Inaba!"

Taichi [Nagase] poured words from his heart. Inaba eyed Taichi sharply.

"...You wait and see, Tai..."

Just when she spoke, Inaba rolled her eyes and became silent.

Nagase [Taichi] as though waiting for this moment, smiled wickedly.

"Inaba, you did call her Taichi when you turned to [Nagase], right?"

Nagase Iori—perhaps the only person who can repel Inaba in the club.

"Hmm—"

Inaba showed a bitter expression.

"That is because...You two have such strange acting skills..."

"Do you think Taichi can act like me—Nagase Iori so well?"

Nagase, having the [appearance of Taichi], stormed near Inaba. Her voice and appearance were of that of [Taichi]; however, her actions and way of speech featured Nagase.

"Inaba, you probably can't believe this...even I don't quite believe it, but you must trust this! I am Taichi, and this [Taichi] over here is Nagase."

Despite being uncomfortable and uncoordinated with his high pitch, Taichi [Nagase] still advocated.

After biting on her nail, Inaba asked the others.

"How do Yui and Aoki see this? Yesterday you two...Nope, it was only Aoki, advocated that something like soul exchange occurred?"

"Yeah, Taichi and Nagase must have changed their souls. This is a talk of experience! Does Yui reckon with me?"

"Hmm...Looks like...I can only admit it really happened..."

"I thought you denied that so strongly yesterday?"

Inaba complained.

"Because that is some awful experience!"

Kiriyama and clapped her hands on the table with a "Pong" while rising, causing her chestnut hair to flutter vibrantly.

"Oh. So that means Yui admits she exchanged her soul with me yesterday night, right?"

Being asked with a playful smile, Kiriyama expressed her extreme disgust, but still lightly replied "Yeah..." and nodded her assent.

"That's because...if I were to say that was a dream, it would really be strange, and Nagase and Taichi have said that they have exchanged too..."

"Hey...are you guys for real? Soul exchanging happen in fairy tales, not in real lives..."

It is understandable that Inaba can't believe it; after all, this 'phenomenon of soul exchange' could not be solely admitted by words.

However strange and deviated from common sense and knowledge some things are, to those who are accidentally touched by them, they can surprisingly easily accept it as the truth.

Even if it is 'an impossible world just by thinking'; once you head inside, you will feel that isn't much of a big deal and just part of our normal world.

Inaba looked at the countenance of the four members. They were all nodding their assent.

"So you guys accept this so frankly...? Can't you at least freak out or something?"

"Ayah...once you are part of it, you will feel that 'ah, eh? Yeah!'"

"Nagase, you completely didn't explain it."

Taichi [Nagase] responded with a sharp-tongue reply.

"I, I am starting to feel a headache coming...but if we continue like this, this will never be settled...Let me confirm this again, you are two not kidding, Nagase and Taichi exchanged their souls for real...or may I say exchanged their personalities?"

"That's why I am Taichi despite my appearance as [Nagase]."

"This shows that you, having [the body of Nagase], should know only what Taichi knows; and you, having [the body of Taichi], should know only what Nagase knows, right?"

She as if wanted to identify them from what they know.

"That really is the most easy way. Any problem is fine; go ask me, I will be glad to reply...In spite of this, finding something that Inaba and I know but Nagase doesn't, won't that be too hard...?"

Nevertheless, Inaba didn't quite care about Taichi's dilemma. She confidently waved her hand and said,

"Ah, no worries on that problem."

"Alright, from now you should reply to my questions. I only admit to [replies that are immediate]."

Inaba rose up and leaned close to Taichi. Despite his heart pounding due to her inconceivable sexual charm, Taichi [Nagase] still firmly bore her vision.

"Come on!"

"You have to reply me in a few milliseconds."

"Ok. I know."

"Alright, then let's start!"

Being said, Inaba deeply inhaled...

She quickly asked the question in one breath!

"What's the name of the latest AV Aoki lent you?"

"'Big Boobs Girl High...' Wait, what are you trying to get me to say! And, and also, Inaba, you don't even know the answer yourself!"

Taichi [Nagase], who had almost accidentally thrown out the AV name, began to panic.

"Ohoh! It is quite rare that Taichi would speak so loud then get flustered...But putting this aside first, why did Inaba know of our trade?"

"That doesn't matter. Also Aoki will help to match the answer. So, Taichi, the answer is...?"

Although Inaba seemed serious, you could see a bit of pleasure and joy somewhere deep in her eyes.

Taichi glanced at Kiriyama and Nagase [Taichi] and confirmed their faces. Kiriyama looked at Taichi with a blazing red face. And Nagase mumbled, "Big

Boobs ah..." while looking at Taichi with the whites of her eyes. Along with Nagase having the [appearance of Taichi], Taichi was on pin and needles.

"Then, Inaba-san, could you cut me some slack and let me whisper the answer to Aoki?"

After being silent for a while, Inaba lifted her chin towards Aoki.

Feeling relieved, Taichi [Nagase] quickly moved near Aoki and told him the answer in case Inaba changed her idea.

"How's the answer, Aoki?"

"Completely correct, captain Inaba! Also, hearing those perverted words from [Nagase] are quite lucky!"

Aoki's stupid speech, made Nagase [Taichi] think "Eh? What is this? I feel I had great loss. Should I ask him for compensation?" and had aa feeling of insecurity.

"Then, after knowing we have two big breast fetish idiots in our club, let's confirm the person who has [Taichi's appearance] to see if she's Nagase."

"Would it be that Inaba, while confirming whether our speech is true, is actually trying to get revenge for teasing her?"

The appalling fright caused Taichi [Nagase] to groan with a shudder.

"Must abstain from opposing Inaba..."

Kiriyama looked as if she became even more frightened of Inaba.

Inaba stood up, walked to Nagase [Taichi], and whispered something in her ears. Then...

"Poof! *Cough...cough*, Wait...Ina, Inaba-san, is that true?"

"True"

Inaba said distinctly.

"Why will...You don't have to say such things now."

Nagase [Taichi] covered her eyes with her hand while slipping under the chair. She looked like she had been whispered to with some impulsive content.

"But...we are actually grown-ups now right...*Sob*"

What did she say that made her like this? This really stirs up curiosity.

Inaba returned to her seat without turning a hair. She then released all her tension, then looked up and gazed at the ceiling, mumbling,

"Personality exchange...I admit it."

Ohoh...The other four members celebrated Inaba's compromise.

"Even if it was an act, the possibility of Taichi making such diverse expressions and the possibility of personality exchange, if being considered thoughtfully, the latter seems more convincing."

"How should I respond to that opinion...And also, why are those three people expressing 'Oh, so this is what happened' with such feelings and nodding their assent...'

Taichi really wanted to inquire others of how they look at him.

"I quite understand the personality exchange of Nagase and Taichi...Alright, assume I understand...So, what will you two decide to do from now on?"

Although a bit late, Inaba pinpointed the most vital problem.

"Hmm...Ha...~What to do?"

Nagase [Taichi] smirked.

"Why do you seem so free today..."

Inaba too felt surprised.

"Before that, let me hear from Aoki and Kiriya of their exchange. You changed back later on, didn't you?"

"Yeah...How do I put it. It should be sometime around 3 a.m. at night? When I was sleeping in my bedroom, I suddenly woke up and felt a bit insecure of my sleep. Then I looked around the room and found out that I was in a room I had never seen before. Though I was frightened when I was confirming the room, it was a pleasant surprise when I saw Kiriya in the mirror! 'Ah...' This made me even confused; however, I changed back to myself and returned to my bed when I wasn't paying attention. That was the kind of feeling I had. Did Yui have a similar feeling as me?"

"Yeah, similar, but the difference is, I thought it was a nightmare when I saw myself in the mirror so I was cowering in the bed. Really, I didn't even care if that was my own bed. Also, after I returned to my own room... Nope, after I returned to [my body], I found a big mess in my room."

Kiriya looked at Aoki disdainfully.

"Ab...About that, I am really regretful."

Aoki apologised.

"Oh...how long was your exchange?"

Nagase [Taichi] asked Aoki.

"I think it was no more than an hour. About thirty to forty minutes?"

"Only about thirty to forty minutes...how strange, of course the phenomenon itself is already really strange..."

Inaba frowned.

"So does it really have to do with time? Or is it affected by something else—"

Before ending his speech, Taichi's view and consciousness was suddenly stopped as if being plugged off.

"—Oi! Are you ok?"

With such huge voices rampantly swirling in his mind, Taichi frowned and reopened his eyes. The dark had suddenly vanished, and the consistent view of the club re-entered his eyes...Nope, not right.

Until just now, Inaba should have been in front of him and on the right. Now she is in front. Aoki and Kiriya's seats have also changed. And [Nagase] now has 'the appearance of Nagase' and was staring at him.

This means that...

" "We're back to normal!" "

Taichi cried simultaneously with Nagase, whose countenance suddenly brightened up.

"Is this for real..."

Inaba murmured while slipping off from her seat.

In the end, that day's meeting still ended with vice-president Inaba's order:
"This personality exchange phenomenon is temporarily confidential and should not be told to anyone."

Chapter 3 - That Guy Who was Interested

After arriving school in the morning, Yaegashi Taichi didn't pass through the classroom, but headed straight to the clubroom on the fourth floor of the recreation building. This was because on the way to school, he got a message: "after arriving to school, head to the clubroom immediately! (mandatory)" from Kiriya.

After all, it would be strange if he had a sense of pleasure after that incident when he exchanged his personality with Nagase.

Just after entering the room, he discovered Nagase Iori, with confused and unfocused eyes, lying on the sofa. The usual overwhelming aura that she spread seemed to have been veiled. Unsure of whether was it because she was too tired or something, but it just felt like the very existence of Nagase was illusory.

"Good morning. You are Nagase, right?"

Taichi greeted her with a type of question he would normally never ask.

"Morning, Taichi! Taichi is Taichi...right?"

It was a strange conversation.

The other club members arrived at the clubroom around a minute later.

"Morning, Ao..."

Nagase held her words.

That's because Aoki seemed to fall like an anaemic patient when he entered the clubroom.

It seemed just like a replay of the scene from the day before yesterday.

"Are you ok...?"

Taichi asked with a shudder.

"Ok...fine...How can I be fine?!"

Of course, Aoki (removing his unusual tired expression) looked like a frivolous, tall and thin literature teenager; however, his tone—

"Is it that...you are Yui? How can it be!"

Nagase intentionally asked in a bright voice.

Three days ago, Kiriya Yui said she exchanged with Aoki.

Is it 'soul exchange' again?

"Yeah! I am Kiriya Yui! Ahah, I've had enough of this...I can't stand this anymore..."

Kiriya Yui [Aoki] was shivering passionately.

No matter how she shouted "I am Kiriya Yui"; because she had the appearance of [Aoki], it was really hard to see her as Kiriya. It just felt like [Aoki] intentionally speaking like a ladyboy. Nevertheless, her sense of urgency showed that she was by no means joking.

"Please calm down, Kiriya, we know that you exchanged with Aoki."

It was unknown whether it was due to her patience having reached the limit or something else, but Taichi's consolation was useless and Kiriya's [Aoki's] emotions exploded all of a sudden.

"What the heck! Why should it be Aoki? Why must I exchange into this [non-cute body]? Why can't I exchange with Iori?"

"What she complains about is a bit strange..."

Actually, it was...very strange.

"Morning~~"

The slack greeting tone of the person coming in froze the three club members.

"Arghh, holding such meetings so early, looks like my luck isn't very good today...Hmm? What? What's wrong? Why the long face guys?"

Speaking sloppily in a low feminine voice was [Inaba Himeko]. That is, a speaking style belonging to [Aoki] that was unheard of from Inaba, until now.

- Pong*! The last member boomed in with her shoulders shivering while breathing heavily.

After swallowing her saliva, that person with the [appearance of Kiriyaama] shouted.

"What you have said was true...! I, I have become [Yui] !"

"This—"

Taichi lifted his head.

"Set-up—"

Nagase continued.

"Can happen too..."

Taichi ended the sentence.

Seeing the perils of Kiriyaama's personality entering [Aoki's body], Aoki's personality entering [Inaba's body] and Inaba's personality entering [Kiriyaama's body], the whole literature club decided to skip the first lesson together.



That afternoon, Taichi, Nagase and Inaba were called to the staff room.

The teacher knew the five club members in the literature club skipped the first two lessons and had only come in when the third lesson started.

"Hmm...How do I put it, it's that...Although I don't think it's necessary, I still have to keep my reputation, so let me interrogate you guys while I have my lunch...it's soba, you know, soba, it will soften if it's left too long."

The physics teacher of class 1C, Gotou Ryuusen (Go for short), let the three students stand around him, and excitedly peeled off the cling film on the lunch box that was delivered from the cafeteria.

"My tummy is also starving..."

Standing next to Taichi, Nagase muttered.

"After all you guys are usually quite serious, so I do care about what happened...Ahha! *Cough, Cough*...Ah~ I choked. Anyways, when you are

eating hot stuff, you would choke on the first bite, right? Eh? You guys won't?"

"Please ask your question now, Gotou."

"Inaba, let me repeat myself. Because I hope to be a casual and friendly teacher, I permit students to call me 'Go'; however, I don't quite remember permitting anyone to call me by my name directly."

Gotou was as he had said, and treated students friendlily and hence, was quite popular among students. He was just around 25, had similar tastes with the students, this had some kind of effect after all.

"After you can actually do what you should be doing, then you can continue with your blabber! I wonder who did all the accounting work for the last cultural festival, Gotou?"

"Ah, thanks for all your help, Inaba-san, hahaha...oh and if you could, please don't mention that in front of the other teachers."

Although his attitude was quite friendly, he really is problematic as a teacher.

Gotou slurped up a noodle, and drank some soup while leaving the noodle in his mouth.

Nagase's tummy squeaked cutely. Taichi side-eyed her, only to see her playfully sticking her tongue out, though he was unsure of if it was to cover her shyness. Her actions were extremely cute; really, no one could manage to take her.

"Then, what do I have to say...Ah, right, what did you guys do while skipping the lessons? Aoki and Kiriyama said they also skipped the first two lessons

and returned on the third...all of you are literature club members. So, as the literature club advisor, this is an acute situation! Right, I will first speak these acknowledgeable words that should be spoken by a teacher."

Gotou was also the literature club advisor. In fact, he created the literature club this year.

"The reason wasn't that big of a deal. Yesterday, the five of us ate some chocolate bread that had gone bad and we were late today due to stomach pains...that's about it."

Inaba replied distinctly in a formal tone. By the way, she ordered Taichi and Nagase to keep silent and abstain from saying anything ridiculous.

"Will I get the same answer from Aoki and Kiriyaama? It seems they are being asked by Hirata(teacher) from class 1A."

"Of course."

The literature club members had already reached a consensus on this point.

"Hmmm..."

Gotou, still chewing his soba, lifted his vision towards the air as if thinking about something.

"Anyways, there is nothing to prove that this is a fraud, and you've said it, so then let's just pretend that's just what it is. You can go now!"

Gotou pointed to the exit with his chopsticks in his hand.

"Then we're leaving. Bye."

Inaba commenced. Taichi and Nagase followed her out after saluting.



Just when they were about to leave, Gotou spoke behind them.

"Don't make it too obvious when you all are gonna ditch class next time, okay?"

"Should this be explained as considerate or simply just a fudge?" Spectators seemed to have diverse opinions.

Excuse me...Although no one was heard, the three of them still excused themselves formally before leaving the staff room.

On the corridor, Nagase quickly commented,

"As expected of Inaba, only you can pull off a lie so boldly."

"The way she lied with a poker face while maintaining that arrogant attitude..."

"It feels like you would be a fraud master in the future or one of those who would pull off a car crash just to ask for compensations."

"If you two aren't praising me, stay silent!"

Inaba interrupted and ended Nagase and Taichi's commentary.

"Eh, we actually want to praise you?"

Nagase replied.

"...Your tone was quite serious, wasn't it?"

Looking at it this way, the "[body] exchanging and soul shuffling between the three people", if publicised (of course, on the premise that would be willing to believe it), would become a condition that would not end with just a big clamour. At least, Taichi and the others did not seem to be experiencing such

changes...but explicitly, this was just an immediate perception. Things that cannot be seen on the surface may already be undergoing changes.

Nevertheless, if only real harm would not be induced...

—At a blink of an eye, darkness fell.

When the light came flashing back, two unfamiliar girls were in front of him. Although he seemed to be sitting, it felt like his level of vision was lower than usual.

"What's wrong, [Yui]? You just dazed out. Eh, your asparagus fell on the table."

Maybe real harm has already come close.

—"I, I need to use the bathroom."

—"Hmm? What is it? We are still eating. Are you not feeling well?"

—"No...It's not like that...but..."

—"Let me go with you."

—"I-It's fine! I'll go by myself!"

Personality exchange suddenly occurred between Taichi and Kiriya. Taichi [Kiriya] avoided the crisis by going to the toilet. Suddenly, Kiriya's cell phone rang. It was Inaba calling. Just when Taichi decided to pick up the phone call, he returned back to his own body.

The duration was around three or so minutes.

Although this time went as fast as the wind...Nope, it should be because this time went was as fast as the wind, it had an overwhelmingly pulverizing power that changed Taichi and the others.



Noon fell and the last lesson had ended.

As simple as it may be—no matter what happened to Taichi and the others, if those problems don't affect places outside school, the world would go on as if nothing had happened at all.

While having a chat with nearby friends and preparing to pack up for home, the teacher, Gotou, came in and held a short class meeting. After he had given some contact information and confirmed the students on duty for cleaning, the day's schedule ended.

Today's regular duties were still normal.

Even though Taichi and the members have experienced the strongest storm yet, that in itself will not change the world.

Taichi and his friends, being in the same group, went to clean the bathroom and left the classroom together.

Then, a chill came over him.

Just when Taichi was about to leave, he felt a strong sense of being watched, and he turned his head in this regard.

What he saw, was the class president who mysteriously correlated the personality exchange of Taichi and Nagase yesterday. She was Fujishima Maiko. Nagase was at her side, and had an embarrassed expression and restlessly signaled Taichi to quickly leave with a hand gesture.

Today's regular duties still haven't changed any...?

"Sorry, I'm late...Uwaghhh!"

At the instant when Taichi came to the clubroom and opened the door, Nagase quickly popped out from the side.

"Taichi...! You...I have something to tell you~~ ! "

Standing in front of him and blocking his way, Nagase as if repressing her about-to-explode emotions, was shivering with her whole body and showed an expression filled with confusion, unease and nervousness.

"How, how are you, Nagase?"

"Yesterday, before I rushed into the classroom...what happened between you and Fujishima-san! Ahahaha!"

Should this be expected? The matter seems tricky now.

"Eh, that wasn't anything serious..."

"It is I who will decide whether it is serious~~!"

It was quite rare that Nagase would get so furious...Aoki's noise seemed to have spread to Taichi; however, Taichi didn't have the energy to care about that, because Nagase was aggressively spreading a sense of oppression.

If I were to fudge the matter, it would only aggravate the situation! Taichi decided to spit out all unreservedly. In other words, he told her that Fujishima saw him rub his breast.

"Whaaaa~! I've been groped~! I can't marry now~!"

Nagase's eyes streamed with tears.

"That, that was just for checking my status, it was inevitable! That was only to confirm whether I had become a girl or not—"

"Nope...or to say, those things don't really matter now...So, so, Fuji, Fuji, Fuji, Fuji, Fuji, Fujishima-san, she...Ahhhhhhh!"

Nagase shivered extraordinarily. Maybe this is what you would call being in a state of panic?

"Are you okay, Nagase? What actually happened that put you into that condition? And the most important thing is, who and what is Fujishima?"

Taichi felt a strange fear...it is unbelievable that someone could force Nagase, who would still smirk even after a personality exchange, into this condition.

"Wait! Before this, I have a question for Tacichi!"

Aoki said sharply.

"What is the size of Iori's breast...Uwaghhh!"

Inaba punched Aoki. Seeing highschoolers still being punched, it felt really sad.

"There's no time for that nonsense! I'll tell you if you want to know! Iori is a C-cup, oh and by the way, I'm a B and Yui is an A."

"Why did you say mine along the way!"

Kiriyama stood up and kicked the chair while screaming.

"Sorry, I was just riding the wave."

"Saying Iori's is fine, but why would you say mine just because you're riding the wave! This is obviously malicious!"

Kiriyama turned red with embarrassment. She furiously slapped the table complaining. Inaba giggled happily at the furious Kiriyama.

"It's fine, Yui. Even if you just have to accept the fact that your breasts are not satisfying, you still have your charm!"

Aoki smiled in glee, showing a set of white teeth.

"What do you mean by accepting the fact? What fact is there to accept? Sometimes small and tiny is more valuable!"

"Oh I see. I wasn't sure how the cup size category worked before, so Inaba is a B and Kiriyama is an A...."

"Taichi~~! How can you still observe so calmly...*cough...cough, cough*"

Kiriyama choked due to excessive roaring.

A lot had happened, and probably much more will happen in the future; however, the fact that the 'Literature Club is boisterous' has not changed at present.

Even though Taichi and the club members played for a while, they started to seriously discuss the matter, as it was too serious for them to stay like this.

"Well, let's recap what's been happening now! The first time was the night three days before...to be accurate, it should have happened two days before? Yui and Aoki exchanged their personalities while sleeping."

Secretary Inaba spoke while fixing her eyes on the blackboard.

"Then there was the exchange between Iori and Taichi after school yesterday when the club activities had just begun. After that, it was the shuffle this morning where I became [Yui], Yui became [Aoki], and Aoki became [me]. Also, this afternoon there was also an exchange between Yui and Taichi...That's about it."

"If we reflect like this, we will realize that this is a terrifying situation...exchanging then recovering, then exchanging again...I'm quite paralyzed."

Nagase confusedly drooped her head while murmuring.

"Then let's summarize what personality exchange is! Before we start, we must add a premise that our conclusions are made from temporary observations up till now...Well, first, it happens suddenly. We have not discovered any rules that will trigger the event. We won't know when it will happen. Second, the duration of exchange is non-rhythmic. The shortest record was noon today, which lasted for three minutes, and the longest was this morning that lasted for an hour and a half. Summing the four times and getting the average, it should be about forty minutes. Third, the exchange only happened between us five club members...Actually, this is not yet confirmed. After all, it is quite strange that this phenomenon only happened between us. It is very likely it will spread to other people in the future. Moreover, despite

that this is an exchange, it will sometimes occur between three people. Let us confirm this again. Any comments?"

"Ah, actually there is something that really bugs me."

Kiriyama spoke with a shudder.

"Anyways, since there is almost no evidence, go ahead."

Inaba pushed her forward, not caring about Kiriyama's feelings.

"Maybe it's because of me...I've been in this a few times already, so it makes me uncomfortable. When Iori exchanged with Taichi, [Taichi's body] suddenly fell and he was unconscious for a moment, right? Then the day after, when I exchanged with Inaba and Aoki—that is when I changed into [Aoki], although I sat down on the floor, my body didn't fall altogether, then..."

Taichi crossed eyes with Kiriyama before replying,

"That's right. I fell on the table when I exchanged with Nagase but I still sat comfortably when I exchanged with Kiriyama, and I was even holding the chopsticks...though I dropped the asparagus on the table."

"Right, this time only my legs bent a bit, I didn't fall to the floor..."

"Does this mean...our bodies are getting used to this?"

Nagase uncertainly proposed.

"I see. Such being the case, it probably is so! Nice, Yui...but should we be glad about being used to this?"

Inaba's implication fell heavily on Taichi and the members.

How long will this phenomenon continue?

If it stays like this, how will it end?

"Then, if there aren't any other comments, let's discuss the measures in pragmatic terms."

Though having not been quite comfortable with the phenomenon at first, Inaba had finally started to pick up her own pace.

Grasping the entire situation—this seems to be Inaba's creed. 'Finding the critical information to grasp and analyse the situation' is the occupation of her life.

"The first thing to make clear is 'why has this happened'. Such an extraordinary phenomenon must be caused by some conceivable reasons...if not, this would become pretty tricky. Do you guys have your own explanations already? I don't remember anything I did that would cause me to be drawn into this supernatural event!"

"By the way, what is the reason for the soul exchange? If we were to find the reason that caused this strange phenomenon, then we should have sensed something different when that condition was fulfilled?"

"Stupid Taichi! It is because we don't know the reason that we are discussing!"

She was right, but still, there was no need to call me stupid, Taichi thought.

"Hmm... Personality exchange in mangas usually occur when two people bump into each other fiercely while running."

"Stupid Aoki—in short, Stoki—what stupid opinions you have...No, this condition itself is already stupid and bizarre enough, so I can't say our opinion is completely irrelevant..."

In fact, someone had raised relevant opinions but was treated worse.

"Dammit, when you admit to something abnormal, you have to admit other abnormal things."

Inaba irascibly bit her left index finger's nail.

"If we look deeper, we should find a reason—"

Just at this moment—

The door was opened from the outside.

Usually, except for the literature club members, no one would visit room 401 in the recreation building. There wasn't any special reason to come. Even if there was, up to this date, every time, it would be one of the literature club members visiting the others.

At least in Taichi's memory, only the five members of the literature club visited this room ever since it was allotted to be the clubroom of literature club this spring.

To a certain extent, the clubroom was sacred for the five present; however, another person opened the door to the sacred place.

The room was suddenly pumped with anxiety.

Some kind of tragedy will befall on them now.

Something 'unusual' is going to happen now.

What is going to happen?

The person masked behind the door is—

—the teacher of class 1C and the supervisor of the literature club, Gotou Ryuzen.

"...Hi~ ...Hello everybody..."

His voice utterly lacked drive.

"I say, Gotou! Don't just barge in with these strange timings! I almost got scared to death!"

The usual confident Inaba also seemed to be bewildered by the situation; however, it was useless to shout at Gotou.

"Ayyygahhh, this is not my business..."

Gotou's face was a bit strange. He seemed to be lacking in vitality. Even his eyes were only half-open.

"...What is with you? Are you not feeling well?"

Because he looked pale and wan, even Inaba heartily inquired.

"It's nothing at all, I am very healthy...After all, [this person] is strangely fit...it's because of me that there is a lack of vitality, drive, confidence, perseverance, etc."

[Gotou's] way of speech seemed explicitly different from the usual, and what he spoke was also pretty miraculous.

Unbelievably wild thoughts slowly spread between Taichi and the members.

"Who are you?"

Nagase commenced with an icy and penetrating stare.

No matter how you look at it, the [living thing with the appearance of Gotou Rysuusen] was speaking.

"..It's a great help that Nagase-san understood so fast...this is because explaining everything is too troublesome..."

"Hey, what are you trying to say...Ah?"

Inaba pushed her words as if trying to find any other possibilities.

"Ayyyhh, those aren't the words that you should be finding, especially in this bizarre condition..."

"Wait, 'Go', what is with you...?"

Not sure whether she was keeping up or not with the condition, Kiriyaama asked with a shudder.

"What is with me? This, of course, is for seeing the interesting faces you have when you guys get bewildered by the 'personality exchange'. Actually I don't quite want to come here...Ah, so can you please not call me 'Go' or Gotou? After all, I'm not him...Although this doesn't really annoy me at all."

The words of the [living thing with Gotou's body] were a declaration, which collapsed the 'usual' life of the five club members and left a deep scar on their chest.

Although someone (mainly Inaba) proposed that Gotou pulled off this prank because he was eavesdropping on their conversation, they couldn't just

acknowledge that it was like that. After all, that guy described exactly the actions that Taichi and the club members took during the personality exchange—including the details that the members didn't discuss—it was just hard not to believe it was true.

Besides, his personality and his [body] really had exchanged, so it wouldn't be irrational to say that it wouldn't happen to other people.

"...I know 'you are abnormal', and 'you are not the Gotou that we know of'...Then, who are you?"

[Gotou] lightly pondered Inaba's inquiry.

"What person...What kind of person should I say...Although I do have a name called «Balloon Vine»^[3]."

"«Balloon Vine»...Why would you have the name of such a rare plant?"

Inaba murmured with displeasure.

"...Ah...who knows? Hmm, so in my stance, I am as if 'observing the presence of you guys'...Ah, forget it. Okay, just take me as someone insignificant."

"Observing our presence...? Then...That...What about the real Gotou? Was he sent to [another body]?"

"Ah... With Yaegashi-san learning so quickly, it's a really big help here...No, in fact, I didn't do something as tricky as 'personality exchange'...or should I say something I did something similar to 'borrowing his body'? But there's no need for you to understand this point...Ah, so why did I speak such things...could we start the main topic now? Ok. Let me start so I can go home...thanks."

«Balloon Vine», with [the appearance of Gotou], looked really sluggish. He kept his own pace in speaking and didn't care a bit of what others thought and felt.

"Eh...does this mean you are willing to explain the condition to us in detail?"

Aoki's wordings were unexpectedly formal.

"Ah...maybe...but that wouldn't be what you guys expected...After all, replying to your anticipations are meaningless...So...now...Ah, would it really matter if you don't jot down notes? Yeah, it wouldn't really matter as long as Inaba who has that super memory power is here."

"Why do you even know these things..."

«Balloon Vine», with [the appearance of Gotou], ignored Inaba's murmur and started to speak.

"Eh...So from now on, and for a long time, between you five... there will randomly occur personality exchanges. Firstly, let me express my sympathy for everyone, you guys worked hard...Although I personally don't think it that way...Ayyah? I said something superfluous just now? Ah...I messed it again, is this because of my usual soliloquy? I really want to change this habit...Nope, in fact, I haven't really thought of it so deeply, so, just let it be..."

"Are the people and the times chosen for the exchange random?"

Having been really silent up till now, and remaining unexpectedly calm, Nagase inquired. Or let us put it, she remained even more calm than usual, and her voice was really icy and cool.

"Ahh...You are right. It certainly is Nagase-san...Then, I will observe the condition of you guys during the personality exchange...just that. Ah...Don't worry; I won't be creeping into your privacy from day to night, I will just observe when something special happens...After all, I don't really want to see...Besides, it is quite tedious...So, do you grasp the condition? Even if you say you can't, I'm not planning to make any more explanations."

"This kind of explanation is not enough..."

Taichi murmured his thoughts.

"Fu...Usually I will shout at you and say, 'what the seven clouds are you speaking!', but we actually did fall into some seven-clouded situation, so let me ask you about what you have said. 'Why did you choose us for the job?' 'Is this condition under your control?' 'How do we terminate the condition?' 'What is your intention?'...Let me first ask these questions despite that I actually do have even more questions."

Inaba continued after Taichi. «Balloon Vine», with [the appearance of Gotou], dully looked at Inaba and stared at her for a while.

"Inaba does quite know how to pick questions...especially not asking 'how did we do such things'...although that is a question that would be asked when you fell into something tricky...but if we think deeper, that actually is not important at all...Ah...my insignificant chatter was too long..."

«Balloon Vine» still maintained his usual casualness and sluggishness.

"Anyways, you are quite right...Firstly, regarding to the first question, I can only say 'by chance'. Ah...In fact, it's because you guys are 'really interesting'."

"What do you mean by 'really interesting'..."

Taichi spoke in a low voice.

"Aryyyu, aren't your lives more interesting than normal people now? Nevertheless, there are some people who are aware of this while the others aren't."

«Balloon Vine's» words seemed to be aimed at Taichi, Nagase, Inaba, Kiriama and Aoki.

What does this imply?

"What were the other questions? Is it under my control, how can it end, and my intention...? Then chronologically...eh? Do I really have to answer these questions? Ah...I completely don't have to. I almost slipped it out of my mouth...That was close! So, now I can only say that you guys just have to get used to the personality exchange. When I feel that 'Ah, this is quite interesting', the condition will stop. The duration won't be very long...Although I don't know how you will define 'long', and I don't want to know..."

"When you feel 'it is interesting'...That is completely from your perspective! This at least means that 'when it will end' is at your control...It also means that you triggered this condition."

Inaba snapped powerfully.

"Ahh...Did I give it away...Or should it be that the phrase 'did I give it away' really gave the things away? Anyways, please don't pay too much attention to it...just live as usual, because being too aware of it is useless. Please put it as 'in the end things will be fixed anyway, so there is no need to complain'. Don't worry, this won't do any harm to your lives...Also, don't investigate the

mechanism of 'the personality exchange' or relevant issues...As you won't understand anyways...If you really have time to spend, just think of issues about yourself, this will be useful to help this end...You will be glad and so will I. Ah...this is really gratifying."

Is it his idea to tell us to 'accept all the conditions up until now'?...To accept these strange conditions?

"Have I missed anything...Ah, right, please keep the personality exchange phenomenon confidential and prevent outsiders from knowing...you guys should understand. If it was slipped out, there will be more trouble for you guys than me. Let me personally make you guys understand this point."

«Balloon Vine» scratched his head, as if trying to remember something, and then he let his vision flow up into the air.

"So...I think I've said all I should...Besides, I've decided to go away pretending that nothing has happened...Work hard! I will support all of you from the surface of my heart...Oh, normally, I should say 'wholeheartedly' even when I'm lying."

[Gotou]— «Balloon Vine» turned his back and slowly approached the door of the clubroom.

He walked away without paying any attention to Taichi and other club members; He just said his piece and left the way he wanted to.

"Hey, wait a moment."

— Having the creed of grasping the entire situation, Inaba couldn't possibly have allowed him to leave like this.

Inaba swiftly walked to «Balloon Vine» and grabbed his shoulder.

"I've silently heard what you said, but I still have a bunch of questions to ask. Besides, you haven't replied to any of my questions!"

There was no fear in her words.

"How can we, having been dragged into this stupid condition, let you leave so easily?"

Nagase cracked her knuckles behind Inaba.

The usual ambitious Inaba, along with the heated air and the uncontrollable Nagase...When the two of them join forces together, they become unstoppable.

"So...I say, these aren't the things that you should do...I am not planning to oppose any one of you...this is true...but I don't want to be friends with you either...Oh, it's better if I didn't say it."

«Balloon Vine», who seemed to be bothered by Inaba, turned slightly back then plainly spoke to her.

"Don't act like everything will go as you wish!"

Inaba used even more strength to try to make «Balloon Vine» turn back.

«Balloon Vine's» eyes flashed sharply in an instant.

Bam!

Sounds of meat, flesh, and bones crackling altogether whirled around.

At the same time, Inaba's body went flying in mid-air.

She bounced off Nagase, who was standing behind her, and even Aoki was caught in her way. It was as if it were a scene from an action movie.

Chairs and tables fell to the floor and were smashed.

Moaning sounds emerged.

The falling Inaba landed on Aoki. Inaba pressed her chest, coughed, and even started to vomit. It seemed she had received an elbow blow near her chest.

"Nyaaaaaaa..."

Nagase took a pratfall right on the floor. She rubbed her waist to ease the pain. Though what she did was a bit weird, it seemed she was fine after all.

"I didn't wish to do this, though letting you guys see my powers could have actually solved the problem much more simply...Ah, I don't want to do this...After all, it's very troublesome."

The instant «Balloon Vine» started to speak, the sharp-edged atmosphere returned back to the sluggish and normal one.

That was an overwhelming shock.

If someone were to ask where and what it was that was shocking, Taichi couldn't answer, but he definitely reckoned it was so.

Inaba, trying to suppress her pain, squeezed a hoarse voice in this calamity.

"All of you...*cough, cough cough*...Don't let that guy...Go away!"

"Inaba, don't push yourself too far."

Aoki took care of Inaba while speaking.

"...Although I basically refute using physical violence, I think it's necessary now."

Taichi walked forward while speaking. «Balloon Vine» suddenly eyed Taichi and kept perfectly still.

He created a feeling of unease and incomprehensibleness even when having the appearance of [Gotou].

But just as Inaba said, they shouldn't let «Balloon Vine», with the [appearance of Gotou] go. He had huge correlation with their abnormal condition. If they just let him go, they might not see him again. Besides, it seemed that it was impossible to negotiate with him verbally. Hence, physical violence was a must.

— Then, Taichi thought that he should shoulder the sole responsibility of the event.

His [Gotou's] appearance made it intractable to do this. But however intractable this was, it was crucial.

With this in mind, Taichi stepped forward, but an arm stretched in front of his chest.

"Wait, Taichi, I will handle this."

Stretching her white-clothed arm to stop Taichi was— Kiriama.

"But, if I don't do it—"

"Taichi, there is no reason that you must do it."

Kiriyama tried to smile gently to cover the slight frown of her eyebrows. She was like a capricious child asking unreasonably.

"Besides, I am more powerful than you, right? It'll be fine, I'll take care of him right now!"

Taichi wanted to refute that, but he fell silent and bit his tongue. Kiriyama was, in fact, more powerful than him. Taichi, as a boy, does have more power than Kiriyama. But if in real combat, Kiriyama, the Girls' Full Contact Karate champion, who is even called a prodigy of Karate, would be more powerful.

But her voice was shivering.

So...

"So, let's do this together..."

"Don't interfere."

Taichi's suggestion was turned down before Taichi managed to finish it.

"Yui! Then let me support..."

"Scram!"

She showed no mercy to Aoki at all times.

Lightly tipping her toe, Kiriyama weighted herself down to her waist and assumed a combat stance. Her chestnut hair flew in the air for a few milliseconds before being attracted by gravity and gradually starting to fall.

The atmosphere Kiriyama exuded vibrantly changed.

With only a height of 150cm or so, Kiriyama, despite being so little, exuded an atmosphere that seemed as if anyone would even move slightly, she would be upon him at once.

Her posture was like a bull in a China shop.

But «Balloon Vine» showed no sign of fear and stared straight-faced at her.

"Sorry for letting you wait so long...Or should I say, why were you willing to wait for me? Just then, you showed no sign that you were willing to escape?"

Kiriyama gradually narrowed their distance and asked.

"...Ah, really...That would be nice if I did...But I got to see something interesting, so I...But that's just something as trivial as to make people comment with 'Is that it?'..."

"...I will stop you from being so calm and relaxed."

Kiriyama stepped forward at the same time.

Then she kicked the floor hard on her second step and leapt forward.

"Go', sorry—!"

Her flying kick was like an eagle stretching its claws to catch its prey.

Despite that there was over 20cm of height disparity, the flying kick was directly slammed at «Balloon Vine's» face— but was stopped by «Balloon Vine's» arm just before the kick was about to hit.

Kiriyama had aimed at his face and flying kicked him with extreme speed.

Almost as if it should have been, «Balloon Vine» stopped the wheezing kick.

To normal people like Taichi, the condition upon his eyes was already shocking, but their battle was beyond his imagination—as if they could not battle after she landed on the floor.

Kiriyama swung a low punch at «Balloon Vine» while landing.

Her graceful flying hair served as a foil to her beautiful, bird-like posture.

But...

«Balloon Vine» acted as if nothing had happened and used his other free hand to grip Kiriyama's right wrist.

Although «Balloon Vine» did this easily, even Taichi knew that this kind of action was near impossible.

When Kiriyama landed with both of her feet, she sat on the floor helplessly and worn out. It was only her right hand that was caught, but looking at her paleness, she had already lost all her morale.

She drooped her head and started to whimper like a newborn fawn that could do nothing but cry. Her powerful image had vanished instantly.

"Yui!" "Kiriyama!"

Nagase and Taichi flew to Kiriyama.

Just at this instant—

— Taichi's vision twisted and vanished.

In the next moment, he was kneeling down and holding on to Inaba's body.

He became confused for a moment.

Then he understood what had happened.

If he were holding on to Inaba, did that mean he had changed to [Aoki]?

[Inaba] vibrantly coughed on the wrists of Taichi [Aoki].

"Hey, are you feeling alright?"

"*Cough, cough cough*...Inaba-san, this is really painful."

[Inaba] said 'Inaba-san'. Within the club members...Nope, in the whole school, the only person who would call Inaba by that name would be Nagase.

Taichi lifted his head to confirm the status around him.

At one corner, he could see someone with [the appearance of Taichi] lying impotently on the floor. By putting the events that just happened into consideration, that should be Kiriya, right?

Being gripped on the wrist by «Balloon Vine» and still sitting on the floor, was [Kiriya], who still could not move and thus remained rigid. Taichi saw that her face was as pale as a sheet of paper.

Then, someone with [Nagase's appearance] crossed her hands and stood sternly.

"Ayyahh, wouldn't it be that...personality exchange occurred now? This maybe...is a bit interesting."

«Balloon Vine» looked down at this chaos and spoke in an opposite, or in a way that didn't show he was interested at all.

"Ah...Looks like the timing is right, I must go now..."

«Balloon Vine» let go of [Kiryama's] hand and stretched his hands towards the door.

"Hey, at least answer me one question before you leave!"

The person who halted «Balloon Vine» had <the appearance of Nagase>.

"We know that we can't stop you, so I want to ask...can we by any chance meet you...meet «Balloon Vine» again?"

"...This is hard to say. When this condition stops, we should meet again. But I can't assure you. Ah, so I say, this person is [Mr. Gotou], right? Please don't be so harsh to him...Besides, I don't want you guys to waste your time on these things."

"Um...This means that it's hard to strike back...Hmmpf! Maybe this actually isn't the case...«Balloon Vine», although I want to destroy you completely, I can't...this is quite lamentable, so can I say what I've observed at the end?"

[Nagase] laughed with no fear, and used an attentive tone while speaking. Though her inner personality—to say such things in such a place, that could only be Inaba.

"When you started, you said that you came here because our scared faces when we exchanged our personalities were funny. In other words, if we weren't so interesting after we exchanged, you wouldn't have come. Also, considering that you are pretty impressed by my type of inquiry, this implies that you have done this a few times, right? On the other hand, if you have a special name called «Balloon Vine», this implies that there are more people like you out there, right?"

Even when stuck in this mess, Inaba still figured out the opponent's motive by utilizing these small bits of information. Despite having the plain appearance of [Nagase], her face was still drawn with an evil grin. This was, in fact, quite scary.

"...Who knows?"

Hearing Inaba's words, «Balloon Vine» replied simply.

«Balloon Vine», for the first time, curved up the corners of his mouth. This was a face that never appeared on [Gotou]...A somber face with a freaky smile.

Invisible threats sparked between Inaba [Nagase] and «Balloon Vine» [Gotou].

But «Balloon Vine» then recovered to his usual sluggishness.

"So...I wish you all good luck...Ah...I didn't have any morale and didn't plan to raise your morale, but I spoke it due to the atmosphere...Maybe I just wanted to say these words."

«Balloon Vine» dropped these words, left a pile of unreasonable duties to Taichi and the club members, and then just left the clubroom.

Up till now, Taichi found out that Aoki was the person with the [appearance of Kiriya] by process of elimination.

On that note—

Because the status should still be confirmed, Taichi and the club members went to the staff room after a while and saw the usual teacher of class 1C and literature club advisor, Gotou Ryuzen there. When they asked him, "What have you been doing just then?" He replied, "What? From just now I

wanted to complete this document...Strange? Hey, why did time fly so fast without there being any progress? How mysterious is this! You guys should include this as the seven wonders of school and publish it in the next issue of «Bunken News»!" Then, Inaba seemed unable to stand it. Then "Hmm? My left hand seems a bit pained...Oh? It has turned red! Wait, if we combine these two elements and make a conclusion...I understand! It's because I used my left hand as a pillow to sleep which induced this pain! That...that's what happened! Ayahh...What a headache, what a headache..." These soft words drove Inaba nuts and she, despite being in the staff room, used a headlock on Gotou (25 years old, occupation: teacher) and swirled her fist to push his head down.

"Ou, ou, ou, ou...ouch, Inaba! I am still a teacher, you know!"

"If you really are a teacher, then you should think and act like one! I have no more power to help you find more evidence, because that's just a waste of time!"

Taichi seemed to understand why «Balloon Vine» used [the body of Gotou], though, he could only speculate if «Balloon Vine» had the same thought.

Chapter 4 - The Week of Fostering Relationships and Detonating Bombs

In Yamaboshi High School, participating in club activities is mandatory—this is the only thing reckoned to be troublesome in the school. Basically, other school rules are very loose.

From the perspective of the school, students should put more effort in their clubs and less in malicious activities. Loose rules give autonomy for the students to become independent.

Still, this disgusted some students. They thought that having mandatory club activities for high schoolers was just insensible. Though, on the good side, club budgets and facilities in the school transcended those of other schools.

The most attractive thing in this school was the huge number of clubs.

When there were enough club members, the club could do whatever it wanted. Thanks to the loose admission procedures, clubs were made one by one and quickly became large in number. The total number of clubs established was even over a hundred. Despite this, most clubs were abandoned after a few years. If filtered with the condition that the club was actually active, the numbers would fall back to normal.

Even if the club was not active, the club still existed in name. Therefore, the first graders would still have to make a choice from the hundred clubs on the list.

One thing of note is that there is a rule that states 'if there are no more than five members, the club cannot have activities with the name of the club'.

In Yamaboshi High, because of the obliged participation of clubs, newcomers must hand in their club application before an appointed date. When they chose an active club, they would directly enter the club; but when they chose a club that existed only in name, they would then have to find other newcomers or club transfers from students in year 2 or 3 in order to attain five members.

In spite of this rule, most students want to enter clubs that are still running. After all, most of the choices were quite normal and they were sufficient in number. More importantly, not many want to revitalise clubs that were inactive.

Though there were students who wanted to join clubs alive only in name, those students usually first found others to join them. Therefore there wasn't once when someone wanted to join a club but there weren't enough people to make five.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions.

After all, no matter what place or time, where there is a corporation, there are outlaws.

For example, one who had an extreme enthusiasm about professional wrestling, knew nothing about the five-person rule, and handed his application for 'professional wrestling study club' immediately after seeing the club name in the list, was a boy named Taichi.

Another example was one who invested a lot in karate up until middle school, but it's unknown if this was the reason that made her to become especially aware of cute things. And so, she found the 'Fancy club' on the list, but had

no idea that the club was only active for two years, six years ago and had no information of its condition. She believed that this was some revelation from above, and even when others told her that there wouldn't be five people, she still advocated a dumb point that it would be fine because there were a lot of cute girls that year and wrote 'Fancy club' on her application letter. The one who did all of this was a girl named Kiriya Yui.

One other example was someone who described her hobby as collecting and analysing data, and was someone who originally planned to join the computer club. But because of an acute argument with the club president (which was ascribed to her arrogance and the club president's low tolerance) during the last day of club activities, she got her application back from the teacher in a hurry and planned to revitalise a club which had detached from the computer club due to arguments—the data processing club. The one who did all of this was a girl named Inaba Himeko.

Yet another example was one who had information from an urban legend, that was, something alleged in Yamaboshi High, that there was a club called the 'Play Club'. It was fine for universities to have such clubs, but they don't exist in high schools. He thought that he could join a club by writing the name of the club in the application, even when there wasn't such a club in the list. Though he felt that the club was super interesting, because there was not such a club in the list (and of course, since it did not exist), he was treated as if he were applying to form a new club. The name of this boy was Aoki Yoshifumi.

A final example was a girl who thought choosing from a pile of clubs was hard and annoying. Thinking that leaving the choice to fate would be exciting and moving, and also thinking that it would make for brilliant and

fantastic memories (or maybe it was just her own perception), the one who wrote 'for teacher to choose♥' for her chosen club was a girl with an attitude of 'let the final decision all on the teacher', named Nagase Iori.

The laws of this society called 'school' will bind such outlaws, especially those who are just high schoolers, forcing them to cooperate with the whole.

But this point had to be marked with an addendum of 'usually.'

Indeed, in most cases, outlaws might as well succumb to those who have the mighty power.

But sometimes outlaws will rebel.

For example, Yaegashi Taichi, Nagase Iori and Inaba Himeko from class 1C in Yamaboshi High who replied with "Teacher, I haven't heard that it wouldn't work if there aren't five people", "Nyaa, so I said I let 'Go' decide...I am looking forward to hearing your choice!" and "So can you please postpone the deadline slightly? I will find another four."

Or for example, Kiriya Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi from class 1A in Yamaboshi High who said, "Teacher! There must be something wrong here! Please can you try soliciting people again? All high school girls like cute stuff, so there shouldn't be any problem there!" and "Eh? That club doesn't exist? Then can I try to establish one? It needs five people? I can gather them real quick..." respectively.

In spite of these rebels, almost none of them could achieve what they wanted at the end because the world was not simple or feeble enough that a rebellion started by anyone could change it easily. In most cases, those

advocacies are directly abolished or pulverized by the rule. But there surely are exceptions.

Rebels will sometimes cause unexpected changes.

For example, one who was basically thoughtless, sluggish and perfunctory — on one hand, unbound by the rules, and on the other, absent-minded — thought that persuading Taichi, Nagase and Inaba to join an existing club would be problematic. Then, he thought, "Let me just put these three together and create a club that will let them freely enjoy themselves!" This person was on the side of the law, but listened to the rebels. The one who proposed this new, unusual idea was the teacher named Gotou Ryuzen.

Another example was a beautiful, naïve woman who was quite thoughtless, liked to join the fun, and was alleged to be popular in her school days. The boys reckon her as "good, very moe" and valued her prestigiously, though others thought that on the educational side, this had still yet to be confirmed. When she heard that Gotou said "Because of this, I'm planning to establish a new club", she proposed, "Well, there are two suitable students in my class". Thus, she decided to let Kiriya and Aoki join the club through this concise conversation. Also on the side of the law, was the teacher of class 1A, Hirata Ryouku.

Through these multiple coincidences, the literature club was established.

In other words, the literature club is a signature of victory of the outlaws. It is the chemical product produced from aberrant students and teachers.

The latter seems more meaningful at this time...or not...whatever, it is just a trivial problem after all.

The aim of the newly-established Literature club was 'to break all constraints and laws, so as to investigate everything in a different light'. Or in short, 'do whatever we want'.

Therefore, Taichi and the other four utilised the club budget in accord of the aim of the club—basically, to do anything they wanted.

Nevertheless, a high school club could not be left alone so easily, so the school called for every club to hand in a monthly report on the activities and make a record in order to keep right for the club to stay. The Literature club reorganizes the activity record into the «Bunken News» and posts and distributes it in the school (unfamiliar and crazy content seemed to be very popular among a handful of students).

But, one day in September—

The Literature club faced a life-and-death situation... No, the existence of the club did not really matter; the important thing was the impact that this may have on each of their lives.

'This', of course, is the 'personality exchange phenomenon that occurred between the five' and the encounter with «Balloon Vine».



"I think all of you should understand that our meeting is the retrospection of the week!"

Taichi, Nagase, Kiriya and Aoki responded differently to Inaba's passionate and somewhat angry words.

Encountering «Balloon Vine» was last Friday, a week before. Today is Saturday and the five members of the literature club gathered in Inaba's house.

"So, let's start...Hmm?"

A telephone ringer buzzed in one of the rooms.

"Sorry, let me first catch the phone. Please wait here until I come back."

Inaba spoke cheerfully and playfully to them as if they were children. After that, she left the room.

"Hmm...Inaba's room is really 'like her mood'! The last time we came was when we had to decide the itinerary for 'the play camp', right?"

Aoki looked around the room as he spoke. Indeed, the whole room was monochromatic and looked still and mature. Necessities like a bed, a table, a bookshelf, a TV and a computer were there; but there was nothing more than that. The room was streamlined for productivity and efficiency—it was surely coherent with Inaba's mood.

"Nyaaa~Inaba is so lucky to have such a wide room that can fit the five of us. I do have a room of my own, but because of the small size and some of my necessities, there wasn't any space left. And because my sister doesn't have a TV in her room, she always comes to my room and stays there...Or I should say, how did she grow so big and tall! She is even taller than me...though I think being small makes me cuter."

Kiriyama sat on the floor and mumbled as she ate the snacks on the table.

"Are you talking about your breast?"

Taichi whole-heartedly spoke, then—

"Yikes! It hurts!"

The biscuits cracked upon reaching Taichi's face, causing an overwhelming pain.

"How did you get that?! I was talking about my height! Oh, I get it. It's because you're always thinking things about the breast, so you came to that conclusion...! I thought Taichi would be different from the others...I can't believe that you would be a pervert like that person sitting over there."

"Nope, this is because you said being small is cuter..."

"Also, are you alluding to me? I have to deny that."

"Rejected."

It is pitiful to see Aoki suffering from this unfair treatment.

"Hey! Pick up those biscuits on the floor, or else Inaba will get angry! After all, she is quite orderly."

"Right! I don't want to be shouted at because of those perverts."

Ascribed to Nagase's reminder, Kiriyama crawled on the floor and started picking up the crumbs. Her chestnut long hair fell towards the floor.

Accompanied with her petite body and her hazy lotus-bordered one-piece dress, her shadows evoked a certain allure.

Kiriyama also discovered her own scattered crumbs that had fell on the floor when she ate her snacks, and when she decided to also pick them up—

"Two boys were staring firmly and anticipated seeing an exposed upskirt of Yui, who was busily picking up the crumbs."

Nagase charged in with a novel style dialogue.

"Na, Nagase! What are you talking about? I would never do such—"

"Dammit! It was very close!"

The boy beside Taichi was surely a blunt and stupid guy.

Kiriyama hurriedly pressed down her skirt and sat on the floor with a red face and a quivering body.

Taichi felt a sense of unease but couldn't come up with any measures to tackle the problem.

Kiriyama gradually approached the biscuit plate with her hands.

"Yui, don't do it! If you were to throw them, Inaba will get very angry!"

Nagase had caused the problem, but she still tried to solve the issue in lieu of just laughing.

"So use this 'pillow of oblivion' instead!"

—Or not.

"Nagase, I think using that is much more painful! Also, 'the pillow of oblivion' sounds much too serious!"

But Taichi's bellow went unheard. While cackling loudly, Nagase threw the 'pillow of oblivion' to Kiriyaama who turned her body and kicked the pillow right before it was about to touch the floor.

"Oh, I can see her panties now."

.....Kiriyaama pushed harder after hearing Aoki.

"Fire————!"

Kiriyaama's spinning kick landed right on the 'pillow of oblivion', and it whizzed through the air into Aoki with a frightening 'boom'.

"Awwwaagh!"

Even with his hands in a defensive posture, Aoki was hit away by the pillow.

The door opened at the same moment—

"Hey, what are you guys shouting ab..."

'Bam!'

Though it had decreased in momentum since it bounced off Aoki, the 'pillow of oblivion' still whizzed in the air with overwhelming speed and beautifully knocked into Inaba's face — which it seemed to hit perfectly. Inaba's head fell back due to the surprising impact. While transferring momentum, the 'pillow of oblivion' did not fall, but instead, clung on Inaba's face.

Time seemed as if it was compressed — the few moments seemed like forever. Inaba finally righted herself, and the 'pillow of oblivion' fell down.

Inaba was standing there with a crooked and fierce face.

The other four could do nothing but to quiver repeatedly.

"...Raise your hands and confess your sins if you have made up your mind...!"

Consequently, Nagase and Taichi were flicked on their forehead once while Kiriya and Aoki had theirs flicked twice. Aoki was also rewarded a slap on his face.

After meeting with «Balloon Vine» who was in [Gotou's body], Taichi and the members could do nothing but to accept the challenge of the personality exchange.

First, they could not neglect this. The exchange could occur at any time; hence, they could not just stay in their homes.

Second, they could not oppose the phenomenon. Even though they really wanted to oppose it, they had no idea of how that could be done. The only thing that they could do was to find «Balloon Vine», the person who was closely related to the phenomenon, and grab more information. But however they observed [Gotou], there was not a trace of «Balloon Vine».

They could not come up with any plans to counteract this phenomenon.

The only thing they had to grasp in the dark was the little objective information «Balloon Vine» had given them.

There was no reason to deny his words. In other words, they had to accept this fate and hope that it will end one day or another.

Their retrospective meeting finally started after a set of hurdles. Inaba was, certainly, the host and the final decision maker.

"Then, let's first review what we've learned last week. That is, what to do when our personalities have exchanged. The fundamental rule is to contact

the person you have exchanged with to confirm your status. Then pretend you're that person and act like him/her and prevent others from finding out. With this regard, we can use some work...Concentrate!!"

Sitting cross-legged, Inaba stared at everyone. Her back was still straight with this sitting posture. In fact, she looked more like she was meditating than sitting cross-legged.

"First, let's start with the basics. Anyone who had ever gone into the washroom of the opposite sex while exchanging, raise your hands!"

"Yes." "Yes." "Yes." "Yes."

Everyone had been to the wrong washroom except Inaba,

"Why would you go into the wrong washroom? If it was an exchange between opposite sexes, you should be more careful! This is old school material, guys!"

"It's just hard to change my habit all of a sudden...And in most cases, we are going to the toilet to escape from being found...Yor?"

"Kiryama, what do you mean by 'yor'? It's because of the exchange that we became more and more embarrassed to go to the washroom!"

High schoolers who would mess up which sex of washroom to go into? More than being chaffed at, these people were more likely to be isolated.

Especially when people like Taichi or Inaba went into the wrong washroom, witnesses could not help it. Only if a person with an appearance of [Aoki], would people shout, "Pervert!" "Hentai!" (Kiryama was that person and she was sent to the teacher to handle the situation. She almost cried because of this.)

"Hey, I have a suggestion. What if we go to the washroom beforehand when we still haven't exchange?"

Kiriyama raised her hand and asked.

"Didn't you just say that it has become embarrassing to go to the washroom?"

Inaba murmured helplessly.

"But, if we girls become [Taichi] or [Aoki], then we will see that scary thing when we go into the washroom! Yuck~~!"

Kiriyama patted her own arm, as if trying to make herself calm from the impact that she gave herself from remembering what she had experienced.

"I think there is no reason to become so sensitive. After all, it's just something on your body. And you will go into the toilet room to prevent yourself from touching that, right? But after you have mentioned that, Aoki and I will be extra careful of that."

"Alright. Thanks, Taichi."

"Hey, Taichi, why did you just increase your own popularity? I will also be more careful, Yui."

"It's fine if you are not so sensitive. Look, Yui, even I can already pee while standing!"

Nagase cackled.

"That's just too much. And also, you shouldn't say that so jubilantly."

Taichi responded with a sharp-tongued response. He became quite indecisive when countered by Nagase's chaste smile.

"Right, the things on these guys aren't much of a deal. On that note, the thing on Taichi is bigger."

Inaba grinned maliciously.

"Why do you so care about those things...And don't compare, will you! Also, Aoki! Please don't be so gloomy about this!"

"Well, let's leave this alone then. The thing is, is our virginity...or body fine?"

Inaba stopped her jokes and inquired seriously.

Taichi could be distinct on this point.

"It's fine, right...Aoki?"

"Well, I did become someone with the [body of a girl]...so it's inevitable that I would like to try those things...Eh? What? Don't look at me with those eyes! I didn't really do that...because it's unethical and there wasn't a time where I could go to the toilet to do that...Ayahh...I am serious! Please stop looking at me so sharply, hahaha..."

The empty laughs of Aoki reverberated in the room.

"I did nothing of the sort."

"Taichi...Hm, if you say so..."

Inaba was leaning to approval.

"Of course I also..."

"...You sure?"

Inaba checked Aoki with suspicious eyes.

"I'm speaking the truth! Trust is important in these times, right? So I wouldn't do those despicable deeds."

"—As you say."

Inaba was hesitated for a moment before expressing wryly. Taichi wanted to ask her "What's the matter?" But before him, Kiriya spoke to Aoki.

"Nyaa, speaking of which, when you became [me] in my house, you called my mother 'mum' instead 'mother' which I usually say. And you always confuse which room is [my] room. That's unforgivable."

"Sorry. But I surely was asked a few times 'what is with you today, sister?'"

"This is a huge problem!"

Inaba coughed twice to interrupt in the midst of their conflict.

"That is something to be properly taken care of. On the other hand, there are already rumours that there is something strange going on among us. Still, it will be rare that they can found out the reason behind is our exchange of personalities."

Truly, if not one's intention, it would be hard for others to imagine what happened. That's why those 'strange parts' are usually accounted for as part of that person's personality.

"Speaking of being in our homes...Iori, when I became [you], there was nobody at home even at midnight, what happened...? Well, I just think that a high school girl staying at home alone in the night is a bit dangerous..."

Kiriyama gradually diminished her voice, probably because the thing that she was mentioning could not be easily said.

Nagase stagnated for a while and didn't respond.

Utter silence fell upon the room.

"Oh...Well...That...That is because there wasn't a chance for me to talk about it. Actually, my parents have divorced. Now I live with my mother who is really busy...something like that. I have protective tear spray to counter normal boys. Then I can hit the hell out of them. So it's not something to worry about..."

"That's a big deal! Even if they were normal boys, treating them too carelessly is the most dangerous! If you don't make good preparations beforehand, it'll be too late when things happen!"

Excited and indignant, Kiriyama cried with all her might.

"Eh...? Oh, uh...sor, sorry."

Nagase, flabbergasted, apologised.

This is really rare...No, this is something that has never happened before.

After Nagase apologised, Kiriyama's high spirits also calmed down. She then also lowered her head in apology.

"Hm, ah, I should be the one to say sorry."

The atmosphere became stiff and heavy.

—Looking back, they were quite lucky in some sense.

Even though something as aberrant as 'personality exchange' occurred, nothing special changed amongst them.

Of course, some inconvenience still existed.

But until now—what you can observe on the surface, are the only things that have changed.

When the personality between people will exchange randomly, is it possible that some existence will not be damaged or ruined?

Nope. Anyhow, that is impossible.

It is just that those events have not yet arrived.

But how long will their luck stay?

Then, if 'those events' really come, what will we become?

When people connect with each other, how will things happen?

Inaba clapped her hands to make a 'bam' sound.

"To conclude, the duration of personality exchange, which is the time when some other person stays [in your body], only lasts for less than a few hours, so if every person uses [another's body] carefully, shoulder their responsibilities, remedy any problems as soon as possible, it will mitigate the effects of the phenomenon. Of course, with only these measures, it's insufficient to solve the problem...Nope, it's useless for such talk now."

Although a bit grudgingly, Inaba still managed to soothe the atmosphere.

Everyone passed the work of controlling the scene to Inaba, not just because of her pure demanding, subjective attitude, but more because of her ability to handle such situations. This was what Taichi thought.

She then switched to an ironic tone.

"The problem now is ascribed to real harm that has been done, right, Aoki?"

"Eh, what harm?" Aoki gazed at her with his jaws wide-opened.

Inaba fell forward in shock.

"How could you forget? You scored a dismal mark on my English quiz!"

"Ah...That, but I really worked hard for it."

"Seven out of thirty and you say that you worked hard for it! Thanks to you, I will be heading to the next remedial lessons! And that together with my usually good grades, creates a reason for me to be questioned...What the hell! Even if you are stupid, causing trouble for others still makes you guilty.

"I can't help it. I don't want to be stupid, you know."

Aoki played with his hair discontentedly.

"Okay, Inaba, don't be so harsh on him. After all, that quiz wouldn't effect your final grades; besides, even if a stupid person works and tries his best, he is still stupid."

Taichi tried to reconcile them, but then...

"Right, Inaba, stupid people can't be cured even by dying."

Nagase spoke.

"Yeah, Inaba, stupid people can just die stupidly."

Kiriyama followed the flow.

"Everyone, do you not recognize that you're not helping me? Or should I say, your words have gone too far?!"

Aoki was such beloved by everyone.

"Though you may think this isn't something serious, it actually is. We don't know how long will this personality exchange last. If it lasts until our mid-term exams or the final exams..."

The three people (Taichi, Nagase and Kiriyama) exhaled and made an 'Ahhh' sound in unison. They started to imagine the words that Inaba deliberately left unfinished and became afraid.

The stupid person and the core of the problem, commenced.

"Eh? What do you mean? If I became [somebody else] during my exams, and somebody becomes [me] then my failed subjects will decrease! Phew~"

"Then relatively, somebody else will have more failed subjects! Or may I say, no one in this room fails exams except for you!"

Inaba's ironic words were not sympathetic towards Aoki.

"Let us think positively...and I mean positive! I believe this phenomenon will end very soon."

Kiriyama played with her hair and pressed her head while mumbling.

Then they still continued their retrospection boisterously, (which started to become mere chatting mid-way), but when evening passed, Inaba said 'my parents are coming back' and the meeting was forced to end.

On their journey back home, Taichi, Kiriyama and Aoki said farewell to Inaba whose path was different, and they started to head back home. In theory, that is. When the three people came to the exchange terminal, Aoki and Nagase exchanged their personalities.

So they contacted each other and confirmed their route before advancing. In case they didn't recover, then they would randomly find a place to kill time.

"Ah, so this is [Aoki's] perspective...it's quite high! This is my first time being [Aoki]. Well, his height is above 170cm."

Nagase [Aoki] was jovial and had no sign of nervousness.

"Keep it down...No, even if it was heard, no one would know what you are talking about."

Taichi wanted to remind her, but then changed his mind.

"Oh...Yui looks so petite and cute."

Nagase [Aoki] while teasing her, stretched her hand to touch Kiriyama. Kiriyama hence parried and immediately ducked her head. She also kept her distance from Nagase.

"Eh?"

"Ah..."

The two suddenly fell into a silence.

They wanted to say that it was not much of a deal, but a subtly awkward atmosphere flew around them and made them reluctant.

Then, Nagase [Aoki] smiled wryly in embarrassment.

"No. It's not what you think, Nagase. I'm not parrying because I hate you! It's just because you became [Aoki]. So..."

"I understand, Yui. I should be the one apologising...I was a bit reckless just now."

"...If Aoki sees this, the odds that he will weep are eighty."

Thinking of his friend, Taichi sighed.

"That's because Aoki always has a strange attitude and would suddenly jump into me so I would then parry out of conditional reflex. I don't really hate him like you think I do! He's stupid, but not evil..."

"Oh, well, you're right."

Although she responded with a few jokes, Kiriya used a very serious tone. This quite puzzled Taichi.

Then, Kiriya's tram arrived and the other two could only say farewell in this stiff atmosphere.

Eventually, they arrived at the station nearest to Aoki's home, but because [Aoki]'s inner personality was still Nagase, Taichi decided to get off this station to spend his time with Nagase.

At the present stage of the personality exchange, including all five Literature club members, the average exchange occurred between one and eight times

a day and the exchange time varied from as short as one minute to as long as two hours. The duration wasn't as long as it seemed.

Taichi and Nagase [Aoki] went to the waiting room in the station. There were no other passengers in the room.

Taichi looked to his right and saw a familiar friend's face. But that wasn't who it was. Instead, another friend, a female friend, was sitting there.

"I was too careless..."

Nagase [Aoki] was silent throughout the journey in the tram. But she started to mumble because of boredom.

"Are you talking about your conversation with Kiriyaama? Hmm, I think that's because of the wrong timing. You don't need to feel so regretful of that."

"It is good to think like that...But I can't...I don't want to do things that others hate...I can't...I should never do that."

Nagase fell strangely silent. But it looked as if another kind of remorse was torturing her, even larger than the remorse for what she did to Kiriyaama.

"Nyaaa~..." Nagase [Taichi] bent her body and covered her face with her hands.

Sensing her feeble and thin presence, Taichi was determined to support her to prevent her from shattering.

"Are you fine, Nagase? Is there anything I can do to help?"

Nagase [Aoki] didn't reply and stayed in static.

Time passed for a while.

Taichi felt it wasn't good to stare at someone for too long so he decided to place his eyes on the scenery outside.

"...Taichi."

Not long after, Nagase [Aoki] commenced lightly and softly.

"What's the matter?"

Taichi responded slowly.

"Well, after the personality exchange, I went to the old book store to take a look at some so-called 'personality exchange' mangas."

"Oh, so you also read mangas."

Taichi couldn't see what she was trying to say.

"Most of the mangas talk about exchanges between boys and girls. Also, the manga would have a high possibility that the girl who had become the [boy] would play with the thing on the boy's body!"

Nagase said with a bright and cheerful smile.

"So I'm thinking if should I also play with that thing on a boy..."

"Wait, wait a moment. What does this have to do with the conversation with Kiriya?"

"Hehe, hohoho, what you saying, Taichi? How can there be any correlation?"

"Hey, where did that solemn atmosphere go? I was thinking if there were any important implications in your words so I concentrated and listened to you...Give me back my efforts!"

Nagase changed her mood really fast. She had looked agonized...but when did she actually start to think about those stupid things?

"I only said to do something with that thing on a boy. But I don't know how to do that in practical terms. So I want Taichi to help me to do that to that thing on a boy..."

"Stop talking about this! Also, though I don't know what you mean, but I won't help you to do 'that' to 'that thing' on a boy!"

"But if I were to do **that** on a boy, being inexperienced, in case something like **that** happens, it would be...like **that**."

"Enough, so you shouldn't do **that** to **that thing** on a boy, then **that** won't happen because you didn't do **that** on **that thing** on a boy."

"True, if I don't do **that** to **that thing** on a boy's body, then maybe **that** won't happen because I didn't do **that** on **that thing** on a boy. But at the same time, I'll not be able to do **that** to **that thing** on a boy to then rouse **that condition** which is called **that**...Nyaaa?"

"Nagase, let me say, you actually just want to say **that** and **that** all the time."

"My secret was unveiled~"

"You even have the guts to say that!"

"But Taichi also became excited by our game, right?"

...Taichi couldn't deny that. In fact, he was excited by their game.

"Hmm...Seriously, I would never do 'that' on 'that thing' on a boy. If I did, I would get hated, right?"

"Definitely..."

"If that's that, then I wouldn't do it."

Nagase [Aoki] cackled. Because the smile was filled with satisfaction and glee, Taichi suddenly thought of—

"Is it because that you wanted to investigate what actions to take during a personality exchange that you flipped through those mangas about 'personality exchange'?"

"Now is the time for Nagase Iori to question Taichi!"

Nagase intentionally interrupted Taichi. She looked a bit embarrassed while she [Aoki] made a ringing sound.

Seemingly depressed, but becoming excited in a flash. Appearing like she wasn't thinking much and just doing what she wanted, but actually thinking indefinitely and planning before all her actions. Saying erotic jokes without flushing or breathing heavily, but becoming embarrassed about odd things...The multitudinous expressions of Nagase became an attractive pearl in the eyes of Taichi.

Then, Nagase had another expression, an expression that was different and was hard to place.

"We all believe that humans use our souls, or our consciousnesses, or our 'personality' as the raw evidence that 'we are what we are'. Or in other words, this [body of Aoki] which contains the soul of Nagase is thought to be Nagase Iori. Though, this would lead to a problem: our souls, or what we call conscious or personalities, are vague existences. What I mean by vague is that we can't see it nor touch it."

As if keeping a distance from what was happening, a smile appeared on Nagase's [Aoki's] face.

"That is why, even though our cognitions tell us 'we are what we are' because of existences of souls, or consciousnesses, or personalities. But usually we use our [bodies] to determine 'that person is who he is'. Look, we are experiencing the exchanges of personalities everyday. But even when somebody feels that we were strange, they won't know the truth. Only we would, right?"

Nagase, as if a host on a show delivering a well-prepared speech, spoke calmly.

"That's right. In other words, our [bodies] are our absolute supporting pillars. But what if the [body], because of the personality exchange, becomes something vague as well? Can we still live with our own identities? I'm just popping ideas."

She then left a playful smile—right at that moment, [Aoki] momentarily closed his eyes and then opened them again.

"...Ayahh? Oh, Taichi." [Aoki] spoke and looked at his body.

"Hm...Oh, looks like I've recovered...Phew~I've finally come back to my own [body]...Hm, if we think deep about this, what I said about coming back to my own body seems a bit strange?"

Looks like the personality exchange has ended. Towards what Aoki said about his recovery, Taichi just replied to his words without really thinking about it. He didn't even know what he was talking about.

He was just startled.

His mind was still occupied by the shadows of Nagase [Aoki].

With no expressions at all while plainly contemplating philosophical ideas and interpreting them, Nagase was very different from her usual self.

What did Nagase actually want him to know?

It was because of her calm demeanour that made her call seem like a tragic cry...that was what Taichi thought, but it was only what he thought; after all, there are some things that he knew and some that he didn't.

He was not able to comprehend what Nagase meant.

Nevertheless, he essentially wanted to understand.

Chapter 5 - Jobber's Reflection

On the following Monday, the first lesson had ended and recess had arrived. Yaegashi Taichi tried to calmly discuss 'the strange look on Nagase Iori' with Inaba Himeko.

He thought that if he looked too serious, it would be troublesome for Iori. So he tried to speak in a light tone. But Inaba listened determinedly.

"Oh...Has it become like that?"

Inaba held her chin against her hand and said profoundly.

"What do you mean by becoming like 'that'?"

"That is that...Seriously, I had hoped it wouldn't go somewhere in between."

"And just what do you mean by 'going somewhere in between'?"

"~~Going somewhere in between is going somewhere in between! Use your brain! Or ask her yourself!"

Inaba crazily pushed Taichi forward. Taichi stepped on the air a few times, then he fixed his vision on Iori who was just standing up.

With a smile filled with satisfaction, Iori jumped up and down and then directly hopped beside Taichi.

"Hm? What's the matter? Anything fun?"

"Nope, nothing...By the way, Iori, about the thing that you talked about last Saturday when we were heading back home..."

"What? Anything wrong?"

Iori had an impeccable smile stretched across her face, pretending she didn't know a thing of what Taichi was talking about.

Seeing that smile caused a bit of dizziness, and Taichi started to feel that what he questioned in his mind was maybe some sort of misunderstanding. Maybe it was just a production of sudden impulse from her mind, he thought.

"Ah...No, nothing."

There was not anything worth worrying—Taichi concluded then abrogated the topic...Though Inaba behind seemed to deliberately click her tongue out of disgust, as if wanting Taichi to hear her dissatisfaction.



Today was another usual boring day in the midst of September. After the fifth lesson had ended and recess had begun, a dangerous atmosphere was ramped up in class 1C.

As usual, everyone was pleasantly chatting or playing. Despite playing on their own, they sometimes would glance at a point in the classroom.

At that point, or what they called the death zone, sat Inaba. Being reckoned unanimously as the cause of the deadly atmosphere, Inaba was spreading an aura: "I'm very angry. Don't come close to me. If you do, I can't be sure of what I'll do to you." (Of course she didn't spat it out.)

Were you to have the slightest contact with the death zone, explosions might be induced. Therefore, we had to treat the situation with our utmost care.

"Say, Inaba. Don't just put that dirty look on your face."

Nagase rocked her chair in front of Inaba.

Her guts and bold actions astounded her classmates.

"It's getting serious!" "That's too impetuous!" "Iori...You are such a marvelous person." "Gosh! What was the bomb squad doing!"

Divergent words spread in all corners of the classroom. Nagase's unexpected actions caused the soft whispers to amplify.

On that note, the 'bomb squad' should be alluding to Taichi, who was standing near the eye of the death zone...In fact, Taichi was pushed forward by the person who spoke of him.

What happened was simple. At the start of the fifth lesson, classics lesson, the personalities of Inaba Himeko and Aoki Yoshifumi exchanged. During the lesson, Aoki [Inaba] fell into a deep sleep in the classroom of 1C. When the teacher found out, he whacked the textbook on Inaba's head, thus making a 'bam' sound. When he woke up, Inaba's personality had returned to [Inaba's body]. This is what happened. (Though it's uncertain whether the recovery occurred when she was asleep or at the moment she was hit.)

"Me...being whacked on the head by a mere teacher? That's so humiliating!"

Who does Inaba think she was? I really wanted to question her once and for all.

"Calm down, Inaban. You have to understand that some things can only be accepted. What you can do is to hold this anger and thrash it onto the culprit."

"Nagase, you know that is an announcement of death to Aoki, right?"

"You're right. Fufufu...the price he needs to pay is very high."

Inaba grinned with an audacious smile, then stuck out her tongue and licked her upper lips.

Her ferocious criminal look caused moans in the classroom.

"Eeeeh!" "Calm her down, quick!" "It's okay, she won't hurt us!" "Is the bomb squad doing anything at all?"

It looked like everyone became interested in what would happen.

"I think I just heard some malicious crap..."

Becoming aware of the murmuring, Inaba swung her head to look around the classroom.

"It's just your imagination, Inaba!"

To safeguard the prestige of the bomb squad, Taichi ceased Inaba.

Right at this moment, the bell rang, signaling the end of the recess and the start of the sixth lesson—class meeting. At the same time, the supervisor, Gotou Ryuzen, rushed into the classroom. He looked a bit different. Usually, he would have come a bit late due to his laziness.

"Oi! Go back to your seats already!"

Gotou clearly urged the students to return to their seats. After Taichi and Nagase said goodbye to Inaba, who still had a dirty look, they returned to their own seats.

Seemingly without reason, Gotou cleared his throat with a few coughs. His presence felt really weird.

"Eh...Okay, listen well."

Gotou's tone was strangely formal. He then announced like he had already prepared.

"I think some of you know this, but our school holds voluntary cleaning activities regularly in small areas. Because almost nobody participates actively, in most cases, the sports clubs take turns doing it. But because of coming competitions and itinerary planning failures, we are short of participants. In our staff meeting, we decided to choose three students from three classes from the first and second grades to participate in this mandatory cleaning activity. Third graders are excluded because they are examinees."

Though a strong, uneasy sense of foreboding was bubbling, the students of class 1C still held onto the slightest hope and waited for Gotou to continue.

"Then, to decide which three classes would be chosen, we held a game of rock-paper-scissors. Because in the game, I, the teacher, beautifully..."

Gotou slowly looked around the whole classroom, wasting a lot of time to keep the listeners in suspense.

"...lost..."

"You peabrain!" "How can you lose!" "Why did you keep us in suspense? We can't stand it!"

The corny ending angered the students. From all corners, they vigorously verbally tackled Gotou.

"I didn't lose intentionally! So, our class has to send out three people! You can choose the participants yourselves! Yeah, and don't go on a strike! If you do, the whole class will have to participate in the next cleaning activity as a punishment...So, Fujishima, help me finish this! Gather in front of the gate after school!"

Gotou flew out of the classroom right after he finished speaking.

"Tea, Teacher?"

The president of class 1C, Fujishima Maiko, felt nervous and puzzled after being called on so suddenly.

"Hey, he got away!" "He abdicated his duties!" "Is he even a teacher?!"

The students complained one after another. Nevertheless, the complaints could only reverberate in the vacuum of the classroom, as Gotou had already left.

"Ahh...That's that. So for those who want to participate...there should be no one, right? To those who are willing to participate, raise your hands."

After being stuffed with the responsibility, Fujishima, in spite of showing a face full of dissatisfaction and reluctance, still stood in front of the teacher's table to shoulder it.

Of course, there was no one that raised his or her hands. Only those who had psychological problems would actively participate in a non-profitable and bothering activity like this.

"You should go." "Sorry, I'm very busy in my club." "By the way, everyone in our school has their own clubs, right?" "Sport clubs usually help in these occasions. Maybe the cultural clubs can help this time?" "That has no relationship with our problem now, right?" Though everyone found different excuses, they, in the end, actually only wanted to shirk their responsibilities.

Fujishima originally planned to seriously consider what everyone thought, but because of the huge dispute, she gave up her idea.

"Phew...Then let's discuss how to decide our participants. If we still can't grab enough people, we will decide this with game of rock-paper-scissors."

"Hey, so you are also going to give up your own duties as a class president?" The students threw away their problems and started to criticise Fujishima.

"Yes, yes, I understand! So let me become one of those three. Then we are left with two. Is this okay?"

It certainly is Fujishima. Everyone began to applaud this time—the attitude of the students surely changed quickly.

By the way, Fujishima is an impressive person...it's important to keep in mind that Fujishima has a side of her personality other than making Iori afraid.

Then Taichi started to contemplate.

If only the voluntary activity was a bit more interesting...But in whichever way I could put it, there would be no one willing to participate in such cleaning activities. Then, it makes sense that shirking responsibilities are inevitable.

If we were to decide by means of discussion, people that are weaker will most likely be forced to participate.

In this case, we would have to decide by a game of rock-paper-scissors. Now when we chose someone who has important things to do on that time, it will only cause more trouble to that person. Or maybe someone will suggest that those who have really important things on their schedule can become the exceptions of the choice. But most likely, another fight will occur when a measure is discussed for such rule.

If we continue on like this, someone will have a headache, no matter what kind of measure is introduced.

However the case, there should be a way to prevent it from happening, isn't that right? Taichi thought of a way...Though it was a way that he already knew from the start—

The way was simple and innocent.

Through this way, everything would be solved.

Of course, we are still left with one person. But at least we can save one more person.

Taichi huffed. He closed his eyes and rose his right hand.

"I volunteer."

—But his voice was not quite right. He instantly found this out.

He opened his eyes.

His distance from the teacher table...No, his own sitting position had changed.

This implies that—

"Ah, umm...So [Inaba-san] is willing to participate, right?"

Fujishima asked with an unbelievable expression on her face.

Taichi and the others were already quite used to the personality exchange, so even when he was a bit shocked in recent exchanges, he could still confront it calmly. But back on topic, the timing of the exchange this time was too accurate, right?

Taichi turned his head to confirm for himself, that is, where [Yaegashi Taichi] sat.

"I...I also volunteer."

With taut cheeks, [Taichi], most likely being Inaba, pointed downwards from her chest with the middle finger of her left hand and raised her right hand straight up.

After coming back to the classroom and getting scolded by the angry students, Gotou announced the dismissal of the class meeting.

"I can understand why Yaegashi Taichi joined, but is Inaba a person that would do such things?" "Inaba-san is really weird today right?" "To put it correctly, those guys seem a bit weird recently."

In the buzzing classroom, Taichi [Inaba] went beside Inaba [Taichi] to discuss what just happened.

"Ah...It's enough already! Today really sucks."

Inaba [Taichi] was infuriated, but she thought of the condition in the classroom and complained in a lowly voice.

"Um...About that, as I have said before, I'm really sorry. This time just blame the 'personality exchange' that miraculously occurred right when I raised my hands."

"Right, including the exchange with Aoki, the timing of today's personality exchange was quite malicious. Still, I am angry at you."

Inaba [Taichi] stared at Taichi with vicious eyes.

Taichi thought it was quite fresh. He didn't expect his body could exude such daring.

"I will find a chance to repay you. Please, let me go this time."

"Hmph. How should I get my revenge?"

Instead of agreeing with compensation, Inaba seemed to look more forward on how to return the loss...She was that wicked.

"Okay, okay. [Taichi], please don't angrily stare at her. If you do, you will become suspicious! Here, smile."

Iori, who seemed to have another motive apart from what she had said, pleasantly pinched Inaba's [Taichi's] cheeks, as if trying to make a smile out of her expression.

"What? This looks kind of strange and ill. Right! This is because Taichi is a person who doesn't usually smile."

"Then stop it please. Nobody benefits from this."

Looking at someone else playing with [his] face, Taichi was a bit embarrassed and felt acidulous.

"Jokes aside, Fujishima seems to be looking at us just now."

While still being rubbed on the cheeks by Iori, Inaba [Taichi] warned her. Taichi [Inaba] turned to look back. Fujishima was standing there with her hands crossed and her eyes fixed on them.

Though Fujishima was usually gentle and friendly, her expression now was extremely scary.

Fujishima pushed Taichi and Inaba out of the classroom to do work. Nagase went to the clubroom after leaving some words, 'You guys go and pick up that trash diligently, bye~'.

The three left their belongings in the classroom and gathered at the front door. Fujishima went in front and the other two followed behind her.

On the way, Inaba [Taichi] lightly poked Taichi's [Inaba's] abdomen with her arm, and inquired lowly,

"Is Fujishima that unfriendly to you all the time?"

"Yeah. Since the first time my personality exchanged with Iori, the resulting turmoil has caused this condition."

"I understand. To get frantically touched by a strange male classmate isn't something easy to get over. Besides, Fujishima seems to have that peculiar taste^[4] and has a crush on Nagase. It is understandable for her to have a crush on Nagase after seeing her, 'naive' and pretty, rubbing her breasts alone. Nevertheless, her taking you as her rival for Nagase may be quite interesting after all."

"This isn't interesting at all."

Fujishima suddenly turned her head to Taichi and Inaba.

"Inaba, can I borrow Taichi for a minute?"

"Oh, what's the—" Right when Taichi [Inaba] wanted to reply,

"What's the matter?" Inaba [Taichi] loudly interrupted him.

Inaba [Taichi] potently hit Taichi [Inaba] with her elbow, and walked towards Fujishima with big steps. On her way, she incessantly looked back to Taichi and mouthed "You idiot".

That was so close...It was just impossible to not respond when my name was called for.

On the other side, Inaba was much more brilliant. She even helped others to remedy their mistakes while not making any herself. Such a helping hand was Inaba indeed.

"I've really cared about this, so I'll put this simply—What's the relationship between Iori and Taichi?"

"Eh...?" Taichi [Inaba], who listened at their backs, was stunned and speechless.

To ask questions directly without beating around the bush, and to neglect the people around who might hear her—she was Fujishima, a venerable person.

"Oi. You guys also seem to be attached today. And also, on that day, you even took Iori away with you..."

"Even if you ask me what relationship we are in..."

Though Inaba [Taichi] spoke hesitantly and turned around to look at Taichi, she seemed to have thought of something and showed a face of sudden hope.

Despite the hopeful face, what Taichi could see was only desperation.

"It certainly is a relationship between a boy and a girl!"

...She was brave.

"You are lying."

...And her lie was instantly seen through.

"What the...How did you know I was lying?"

"Don't underestimate me. Once you reach the same level as me, you would know whether a girl had been touched by a boy with just your eyes."

Fujishima's unfathomable potential sent a chill down my spine as she reset her spectacles on her nose, though I am quite hesitant whether to praise her for this.

"Is that so? Then allow me be blunt."

Inaba's [Taichi] emotional murmur was inexplicable.

Taichi wanted to interrupt and cease her words, but it was too late. Besides, even if he tried to deny Inaba, it would not persuade Fujishima if the speaker weren't Taichi himself.

"The relationship between Nagase and I...is close to the relationship between a boy and a girl!"

"Close...I'm surprised. This may be a crisis!"

"This is the case, so please don't go near Nagase!"

"That was what I have to say to somebody who frantically touches a girl's body..."

"Alright, stop! Please!"

Taichi [Inaba] squeezed between the two of them to end their topic in order to prevent anything dangerous from happening.

Inaba [Taichi] clicked discontentedly with her tongue while Fujishima snorted.

Taichi could only sigh to their responses.

A teacher was (forced) explaining to the students gathered at the front of the door what there was to do. What they have to do in brief was to collect an appointed amount of trash near the school. If anyone was to be found to have collected trash from the trash bins to get the amount, he or she will be severely punished. After explaining, she ordered the students to distribute amongst each other a pair of work gloves and a trash bag (and some even had a long picker for collecting rubbish). The students were off to work after that.

Because Fujishima went into action with her friends from other classes, Taichi and Inaba were left to themselves as they proceeded outside school.

Under a clear bright sky, the two were wandering around in an aberrantly spacey park near the school.

"Arghh...Am I on a date with you collecting trash?"

Inaba [Taichi] clanged the trash she held in mid-air with her hands and lazily muttered.

Indeed, the bright weather was very suitable for walking. If the fact that they had to collect trash was excluded (though this is inevitable), they seemed to be on a date.

"This can't be helped. I—"

Instantly, the scene became pitch black and his position had changed—or had switched back. Taichi's personality returned to [Taichi's body] while Inaba's personality returned to [Inaba's body]—everything was back to normal.

"...Returning back to my body with this strange timing? Life sucks...Oh, so, Taichi, give me your trash picker."

Inaba complained angrily and snatched the trash picker from Taichi's hands.

"Please don't mind."

"How can I not mind it? Thanks to you, my image, which I used half a year to establish, was pulverized in just a few hours."

"The way you end your sentence sounds just like the Spanish tone used to present the wrestlers when Japan broadcasts American Professional Wrestling."

"Could you not use a metaphor no one would understand, you fool."

Even though I knew how stupid the metaphors are, sometimes I can't stop myself from saying them.

"But letting others know the other sides of you, such as when you sleep and also show that you are actually a good person, won't that make you more popular instead?"

"I don't count on that. That's only a loophole for my enemies—this infuriates me."

"Who are your enemies?"

"Basically, everyone except myself."

Inaba grinned boldly, said "Oh, I found a large target", used the trash picker to clip the target and threw it into her trash bag. The target seemed to be a crushed monthly magazine drenched in the rain.

"Your definition of 'enemies' is quite unpleasant, but first putting that aside...What the hell happened when you talked with Fujishima! Can you please speak in euphemism? I don't want to make enemies with anyone in class."

Taichi emphasized his words, but Inaba just snorted in reply.

"Hey, it's fine if you'll thank me, but I don't remember doing anything that deserves you blaming me! Didn't I set up an explicit opposition with

Fujishima? If you could work hard, I bet you could save Iori from Fujishima's evil hands."

"I don't get what you mean."

"What you are saying? Isn't this condition suitable for you? Right—"

Inaba temporarily stopped herself and met her eyes with Taichi. Her eyes were filled with sympathy, compassion, gratefulness, anger and anxiety. If Taichi hadn't guess wrong, there was also a bit of enviousness.

She then continued to speak,

"—You are a fool that loves to sacrifice himself."

"...What do you mean by a fool that loves to sacrifice himself?"

Taichi did not quite understood what Inaba meant. Though he didn't understand, he started to feel some trouble breathing.

"It is what it literally means. Aren't my wordings very exact?"

Inaba looked at Taichi with a slant, and spoke confidently.

"I don't find it anyhow exact—"

"Then let me ask you, why would you voluntarily join this nasty activity?"

"...Because no one wanted to do it, but someone had to. If I took the job, then others would not be forced to join—"

"Why didn't you put yourself inside the group of people you call 'others'? Surely you didn't actually want to do it either? Such being the case, aren't you the one being forced to join?"

"Well...."

Taichi was speechless. He wanted to say something but he couldn't find the words he wanted. Those words must have hidden deep in a foggy space.

"You certainly are a fool that likes to sacrifice himself. Why can't you use the same measure you take with yourself as you take with others? Why do you have to treat yourself so specially? Oh, I do not mean that you are looking at yourself as more sublime, but as the opposite—you disdain yourself so you think that it's no big deal to sacrifice yourself. I can't understand why anyone would not treasure him- or herself. I am even disgusted by this."

Inaba used words that were more spiced, relentlessly slashing them onto Taichi.

"What's the reason that you like professional wrestling?"

Inaba suddenly switched their topic.

Though it was sudden, it was something he loved; therefore, he answered directly and fluently.

"If I were to explain to outsiders, it should be 'the beauty to bear', because professional wrestling is a performance run from script, it's not a fight that the two opponents bet on their lives. On the contrary, this is a performance to attract the audience and 'compete with the audience'. Professional wrestling is not only about having a strong side with magnificent skills, but also about needing a side to 'bear' those strong attacks. Whether the skills or the competition would be attractive to the audience, or whether the competition would have a remarkable completion, hinges mainly on the side who 'bears' those attacks. The form of professional wrestling could be

complete only when a side bears attacks. I especially like those who act as losers, hence their name, 'jobbers'. If I were to speak of the advantages according to their losing faces—"

"Shut up, you disgraceful professional wrestling otaku."

Inaba rudely lashed out at Taichi without any attempt of veiling her scorn towards him.

"I-It's you who told me..."

"No one told you to explain it in such detail, you disgraceful professional wrestling otaku."

She repeated her voice of dissatisfaction in disdain.

"Y-You don't have to repeat 'disgraceful professional wrestling otaku' twice..."

"So what I mean is that what you call 'the beauty to bear', if implemented on you, should be called 'the beauty of self-sacrificing'."

"Inaba, you are not quite right, 'the beauty to bear' is—"

"Don't get me wrong. I am not referring to any regular professional wrestling, but your case."

"My case isn't either..."

Was it because of my being overwhelmed by Inaba's forcible attitude that caused my indistinct reply...? Or was it because she understood the crux of the matter?

"Hmph, this is hard to say."



Inaba sighed, looked down on the floor, picked up an empty lunchbox and threw it into her trash bag. I was uncertain whether it was because she had already finished saying what she had wanted to.

Compared to Inaba, who has been successfully picking up trash from the beginning, Taichi's trash bag was still completely empty.

"Then, back to the topic...You like Iori, right?"

"Arghh!"

Taichi couldn't stop himself from puffing.

"Your responses have become quite exaggerated. Back then, you were a person with no emotions."

'Gwahaha'—Inaba held her belly while laughing. It was obvious she had known Taichi would respond in such way when she asked.

"I'm only forced to do so! Besides, what topic did you go back to? You didn't go back to any topic at all."

"What I mean is to encourage you to get Iori as quick as possible before she gets snatched over by Fujishima."

"How did it end like this? I don't understand the significance of competing with Fujishima. And before that, 'I must get Nagase' was already a strange point."

"Do you not understand? Among the five members of the Literature Club, the weakest person is Iori! I've never seen someone as unstable as her."

The scene of when I chatted with Nagase [Aoki] flashed in my mind.

Expressing a many emotions in that short period of time...Was she full with emotions, or was she unstable?

"Also, you like those who are weak, right? After all, you must be the one who becomes the wall who stands upon the wind, the man who bears his wounds to protect his companion. If you don't, she might go crazy! To someone who is devoted to self-sacrifice, she is the best choice ever."

"...You should not decide things yourself, Inaba. I haven't even thought about those things."

I acknowledge Inaba is smarter than me, but I am the only person that knows the most of myself, so it was unreasonable of her to criticise me with her imagination.

"This is hard to say—" Inaba spoke lowly, and twisted her trash picker around.

"It was Taichi who didn't understand, so things got worse. Also, let me first tell you, Iori also likes Taichi."

"No, that can't be possible."

Taichi calmly responded with a sharp-tongue response.

"Tsk, your response is so boring. You should have been better the second time."

Inaba would set up these strange rules.

"I don't care! It was only Inaba making things up."

"How rude you are. I, of course, have real evidence before I would say so. Iori, that girl needs some support! She needs to confirm her own existence whenever something happens. Isn't this just perfect for the disgusting you, who wishes to pay his everything for others? Taichi, it's because of the distorted and broken aspect in you that make you and Iori fit. It's the same rationale that gears work together, right?"

She's gone too far.

"You've gone too far—"

"Besides, you have the most vitality when you are with Iori."

This was the only line where Inaba turned her eyes away and rudely spat.

"Is that so?"

It was because she used to elucidate with such irony that she surprised me when she suddenly removed it and spoke normally.

"Anything is fine for me. This is a problem between you and Iori, do whatever you guys like. It has nothing to do with me."

"It was only a little bit of meddling in your business—" It occurred to Inaba too that this type of line didn't match her, so she quickened her walking pace after commenting embarrassedly.

Though she was the type who would usually recklessly tell others her thoughts bluntly in an ironic tone, this was the first time that Inaba's words were deeply burnt into his memory. This had something to do with the personality exchange somehow.

"But I still think that—" Inaba murmured worriedly. And that together with her grand posture made seem like a mismatched mosaic.

"Iori is in the most danger."

"Danger...What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, in this 'personality exchange', Iori seems to be the most likely person to get pulverized or destroyed. And the person who will experience the most negative impacts is her."

She spoke frankly.

"Negative impacts from the personality exchange? Certainly there would be such problems, but isn't getting pulverized too serious? We don't know exactly when big problems will arise, but until now there have been just a little bit of trouble. Should we take it that seriously? After all, the personality exchange only stays for two hours, and in most conditions, much less. If we put it like 'it's just that', it's really not something that serious, at least we haven't seen anything serious until now."

Taichi replied easily without much thought.

"You are such an idiot!"

Inaba angrily scolded him with a tone filled with derision.

She drooped her head and stopped moving. She quivered agitatedly while she continued.

"Are you serious? How can you act as if it was nothing to you? I could not be wrong—the dullest and most slow-witted person of us is you, Taichi. Maybe it's because you are an idiot who loves to self-sacrifice, so you had become

unresponsive to pain. But our condition now is the most serious—a crisis that is filled with absolute desperation! Anyone could get hurt or destroyed at any time, anywhere or by anything that could happen. Do you realize this? In this personality exchange, there is nothing that is not serious or unimportant!"

Inaba lifted her head and harshly stared at Taichi with her long and fine eyes, as if wanting to kill him.

Inaba gets angry easily, but she never gets so angry that she would drown in her emotions with anger transcending her sanity.

But Inaba was now driven by her emotions.

This was indication of her extreme anger. Though this was reasonable—She marked the condition with complete despair, and even gave out a warning. Nevertheless, Taichi still spoke mindlessly like an idiot.

My past self once reckoned the personality exchange as a condition that was very dangerous. I did have the chance to think like Inaba, but maybe it was because I wanted to persuade myself to think ideally that I would say such naïve and dumb words.

"...Sorry, Inaba." Taichi spontaneously spoke the words of apology.

Inaba smiled wryly with an embarrassed expression on her face.

"Ahhh...No, I should be the one to apologise. It seems that I've gone too far today. My mood wasn't good after all these things that have happened to me...sorry."

Inaba locked her lips and looked at Taichi insecurely. Her eyebrows emphasized her melancholy.

She murmured with an unsteady voice, as if she was afraid of something.

"Are you willing to...forgive me?"

Inaba appeared timid and weak, much different from her usual self.

Taichi's heartbeat accelerated due to Inaba's unimaginable figure, but still, he managed to squeeze his words out,

"...There wasn't anything to be sorry for or to be forgiven. Besides, I think what Inaba said was quite right...Hey, it doesn't matter, you don't have to get so worried."

Hearing Taichi's comforting words, Inaba eased off, loosened up her cheeks and had a natural and comfortable expression that was enough to puzzle Taichi deep in his heart.

"Right, we must get going! If we just stay here, we'll never finish our duties."

Taichi was a bit embarrassed. He advanced forward without looking at Inaba.

"—You sure a dull and slow-witted person."

Inaba's murmur was carried to Taichi's ear by the wind.

"Because...you didn't even notice that your trash bag had already flown away."

"...Eh?"

Taichi looked at his hands.

The trash bag that should have been in his work-gloved hand was gone.

"...Inaba, do you know when it flew away?"

Inaba smiled coyly as if feeling jovial deep down in her heart.

"It was at the moment when I said 'You like Iori, right?' and Taichi went 'Arghh!'"

"Wasn't that a long time ago? Why didn't you tell me then?"

"Because...it's more interesting this way."

Inaba who always maliciously teases others for fun like a sadist...stood there plainly.

Chapter 6 - Low Blow's Most Powerful Theory

A few days after the voluntary cleaning activity, we follow our main characters back to the Literature club clubroom. There, we have Yaegashi Taichi who had transferred to [Himeko Inaba] and Yoshifumi Aoki who had transferred to [Kiryama Yui].

Both of them now had mischievous smiles while they enjoyed watching the video they had just taken on the phone.

On the screen of the phone...

"I, I...just can't become so blunt as to act cruel...Actually, my heart...my heart has deeply fallen for Aoki, sorry...for speaking such words all of a sudden..."

[Kiryama] spoke the line with gleaming eyes.

"I, I, eh...I, my heart...eh, actually...I really love you...If you are willing to...please...go out with me."

[Inaba] lowered her head in embarrassment.

The girl members of the Literature Club went out to mind their affairs. (To be accurate, the members who have work to do should be Iori Nagase, Taichi and Aoki; but now Kiriyama was in [Taichi's body] and Inaba in [Aoki's]. Having switched to the [two girls], the male members were now carrying out a plan to reveal what the girls wanted to say using their bodies. This stupid plan was, of course, thought up by Aoki.

"Arghh, this is terrific! [Inaba] was incisive, boyish, apathetic and displeasing to most students...but when she confesses acidulously like a young teenage girl...this disparity is just so...moe!"

Though it was embarrassing for Taichi to have acted like that, Aoki seemed to like Taichi's acting skills.

"Aoki, you...completely conveyed your innermost wishes."

"Right! Ahhh~~I wish that one day she would speak these words herself."

Aoki [Kiryama] murmured. In the eyes of Taichi, it was miraculous to hear such words from [Kiryama].

"By the way, Aoki. You sure are faithful to Kiriyama."

Aoki neither lost his heart nor did he become desperate when treated ruthlessly. To be frank, I really respect him in this regard.

"Yeah, I was mesmerized by her for no reason...No, there must be some reason behind this! For example, she's cute, lively, pure and childish. When something comes in her mind, she will act regardless of the consequences. Also, she's a tsundere."

Her being a tsundere was more like Aoki's wish.

"But my instincts are the most important! That's why I said I was mesmerized."

Aoki [Kiryama] nodded while he spoke of his love towards Kiriyama.

"Anyways, I'm happy now. Let's delete those videos."

Hearing Taichi's [Inaba's] words, Aoki [Kiryama] quickly interjected with an "Oi!!" and shrugged his shoulders like those Americans actors in comedy movies.

"We have just started now."

Aoki [Kiriyaama] smiled evilly.

"But..."

"Are we going to stop now?"

Aoki forcibly persuaded Taichi to shoot their first video, but for no apparent reason, Aoki [Kiriyaama] stopped being as persuasive as he was before and seemed to be waiting for something...No, or rather, he seemed to be hurrying Taichi by starting to hum a song.

"...If you insist, then it's fine with me."

That being said, Taichi felt like he was losing something important in humanity.

Their spirits had become crazy when they began to film themselves again. In theory, they should have sufficient time to enjoy themselves before everyone came back. Nevertheless, the two got carried away.

They were too careless.

The door creaked.

[Taichi] and [Aoki] came back earlier than expected. (If there was no swapping around since their last contact, Kiriyaama and Inaba should be [Taichi] and [Aoki] respectively.)

Seeing their arrival, Taichi [Inaba] and Aoki [Kiriyaama] froze immediately.

What they had just said shouldn't have been heard, so if they treated this calmly they should have been able to get away with it. Nevertheless, they

completely lost their senses (because they were so agitated they forgot about this already).

A few seconds of silence were inevitable.

Besides, the newly arriving two members of the Literature Club were not so naïve as to waste those few seconds.

"Yui! Grab that phone."

Inaba [Aoki] immediately directed her.

"Hand it to me!"

There was immense change in physique when she switched to another body—Kiryama [Taichi] numbly ran to Aoki [Kiryama].

"Yikes!"

Aoki [Kiryama] yelped and shrank himself down. In a blink of an eye, Kiriyama [Taichi] had already snatched his phone and handed it to Inaba [Aoki].

"Let me see what you have done with my phone...Eh? A video huh..."

In the silent clubroom, the only sounds came from the video that was taken by the phone, and it reverberated in the room.

Corny lines continuously flew into the silent room.

Taichi looked at Inaba [Aoki], only to see her emotionless as she stood stone still. He even could hear her blood vessels ripping apart...that, of course, was only his imagination.

"Hehe...Looks like you've played a pretty interesting game."

While speaking, Inaba [Aoki] took off her sweater, loosened her tie, and unbuckled the buttons on her shirt. While everyone was still gasping in awe, Inaba [Aoki] threw her shirt away and took off her crew neck. Leaving her upper body naked, she started to move her hands towards the belt on her pants.

"Wa-wait. What are you doing?"

Kiriyama [Taichi] finally screamed. He already had a red flushed face.

"What am I doing? I just want to run naked around the school for some air."

"You, you're kidding, right? Inaba?"

Taichi [Inaba] felt flabbergasted at Inaba's idea of a vengeance plan.

"Who knows whether I'm kidding or not...fufufu."

"Stop, please stop, Inaba! If you do that, [I] would be dead for sure!"

"That's right, Inaba. However you do it, a death penalty seems a bit too much..."

Even if she was Inaba, she should still have a little conscience—

"Die."

—Seems like she doesn't have any conscience at all.

"Please, I beg you, Inaba-san! I can't live on with this body anymore if you do this!"

Aoki kneeled down in front of Inaba, however, it was surprising enough to see [Kiriyama] kneel down to [Aoki].

"Shut up! This is your punishment for doing those humiliating things with [my body]!"

In the end, after a while of persuasion, the three (after all, since this was crucial, Kiriyaama also leaned towards Taichi and Aoki's side) finally ceased Inaba, who was still angry.

When the atmosphere in the clubroom settled, everyone returned to their [bodies] (Should I say that they calmed down because Inaba returned to her [own body]).

"You...if you do it again, meet your fate."

"Yes, we are really sorry, Inaba-san."

Taichi and Aoki bowed to apologise.

"On top of that, I'm also angry. If I find you doing this next time, I'll teach you a lesson using violence."

Kiriyaama smiled (though pretended).

"Yes, yes...I understand."

Taichi was scared. If Kiriyaama was serious, I might even have to go to the hospital—he thought.

"This feels strange, but I actually want to be taught a lesson!"

Aoki still spoke mindlessly.

"...Ah, right. There is something I'm quite aware of. Could it be that..."

Aoki hesitated as if it was hard to speak, but he then managed to continue.

"Could it be that Yui is afraid of us? When I became [Yui], if we...or should I say, boys, when they come close to me, I felt that my [body] would quiver."

Taichi couldn't understand fully what Aoki meant. He "Eh?"d with his head aslant.

Nevertheless...

Aoki's words seem to have hit the core of the matter.

Kiriyama froze with her face white.

Her eyes aimed at a point and didn't move an inch.

She didn't even blink.

She was like a doll with broken strings.

Then, Kiriyama jumped up as if she were suddenly plugged in. She squeezed out a smile and some words as if she had mechanical problems.

"...Ah...Eh? How could that happen...Would I even be scared of people like you? Stop kidding! That's because...I'm very strong! I'm stronger than you people...so...so, I don't fear boys."

Nevertheless, however the listener, anyone would know that the truth was an inversion of what she had said.

Kiriyama held her shoulder with her hand to stifle her shiver, from what I perceive, because of the winter's freezing weather. At the same time, she gripped on to her long chestnut hair and her white shirt with the same hand, rubbing those colours together. Her hair was firmly grasped in her hand.

Moving slightly forwards, her hair fell over her head in a way that completely veiled her facial expressions. Her body seemed even smaller than usual.

Seeing that girl unfortunate and alone, Taichi knew he had to do something...something, he must do.

But until now, he never knew the side Kiriama showed now had ever existed.

Kiriama had never shown such expressions...No, maybe it was I who had never seen them. Maybe it was I who didn't care.

"Sorry!"

Aoki suddenly stood up and apologised with a large bow.

"We've known each other for some time now, and I even said I love you, nevertheless, if it were not for this strange phenomenon, I wouldn't even know you...Maybe I hurt you too much...I...I am the worst bastard!"

He said with all his might and generosity.

Kiriama abruptly lifted her head.

Her usual ambitious and strong eyes were filled with tears; her eyebrows were clenched painfully. Her tousled hair stuck to her bud-like cerise lips.

She met her eyes with Inaba, Aoki and Taichi in chronological order.

Confirming their expressions, she then escaped.

She turned her body suddenly, letting her chestnut hair and her skirt fly around; she used the elastic force accumulated on her legs in a second and sprinted to the door. No one had the time to stop her.

"Yui!"

Though a bit slow, Aoki still shouted and began to chase her.

Inaba, however, put her right hand in front of Aoki to stop him.

"Inaba?"

"It was nice of you to spot this, though, you should have considered the timing of your words before you spoke them...Nevertheless, from what I've observed just now, the timing was insignificant...Or I may as well say, that kind of feeling will sink into the [body]. Even though I knew it, I didn't really have that feeling when I was [Yui]. So was it a problem of her body? Aoki, you don't think much, but you sure are quite sensitive to your feelings."

Inaba mumbled while scratching her head with her other hand.

"Inaba, you know this? Then why did Kiriyaama..."

Taichi inquired to Inaba to learn more, even though he was led by his nose all along.

"It would be rather strange if we didn't notice it...though this may sound cruel to you guys. After all, she veiled it meticulously. It's impossible to think of such things just by our usual communication...though, I did find out. In fact, her problem is quite serious! Ah, I don't want to explain much here. If you want to know more ask her yourself."

"Say...can you first let me go?"

Aoki pushed away Inaba's hand and tried to get through her.

"Leave it. Even if you go now, I doubt you can do anything. Yui is an agitated type. It'll be better if I go and calm her a bit instead of your stimulating her recklessly."

They stared at each other for a few seconds. After that, Aoki relented.

"...I understand...my hopes are on you, Inaba."

"What I can do is only comforting her, you would have to think of what to do later...Taichi, you are also counted in."

"I, I know."

Taichi nodded in consent though he was a bit afraid of Inaba's cold stare.

Inaba stared at Taichi doubtfully for a while, and then she took her phone and left the clubroom.

She spoke to Taichi and the others with her back facing them.

"I knew somebody would get hurt...No, it depends on the person."

Inaba closed the door after that.

Only Taichi and Aoki were left in the clubroom.

"Ah...I'm fed up with my stupidity...my slow-wittedness is starting to infuriate me...Waa, I think I'm going to hate myself...I can't believe Yui had that feeling all along...Why didn't I notice until now...I only found out because of my exchange with [Yui]...This is breaking the rules."

Aoki sloppily stuck his face on the table and mourned.

"Some things are inevitable. Besides, she veiled it so brilliantly that it even earned Inaba's praise...Or I may as well say...even when I become [Kiriya], I didn't observe this...How can this be?"

"Ayahh, it also depends on the time and place of the exchange. I just found this out indistinctly. Ahhh...though it's true literally..."

Taichi and the others learning the secret that Kiriyama was trying to hide may cause huge changes in the world. Would it be that not finding out or not knowing would be better? Taichi had this thought for a moment, but then he quickly felt that it was erroneous to think in such way.

Because he was Kiriyama's companion, this secret would have been unveiled one day or the other in any random form. It is impossible to not confront it. The problem is when it would arrive. In this case, however, it was not an ideal form.

"But if we think deeper, there surely were oddities! For example, had Taichi ever touched Yui's body or have been touched by her? Of course, it doesn't count when you're in an exchange."

"...No..right? There is nothing strange as we are highschool boys and girls."

"Hey, this may not be the case. Take the Literature club as an example. Inaba, who easily gets crazy or violent, has body contact from time to time. Iori also likes intimate contact...so there are quite a lot of cases?

Indeed, the members of the Literature club were very close together so there were not much divide between the boys and the girls. 'Touching and being touched' were trivial things that weren't strange.

"In this atmosphere that allows such intimate contact, Yui, who is such a lively girl, didn't do this. Isn't this strange? Furthermore, Yui, an active girl that held steadfast in her feelings, could have replaced the violent role that Inaba played. But she didn't. Isn't this strange or what."

"Yui is just one who wouldn't fight...No, this isn't right. After all, she had thrown biscuits at me before."

"I was also had the 'pillow of oblivion' thrown at me."

This was something that happened in Inaba's house.

"I'm not trying to say that she is normal only if she 'does those things'. I just feel weird when I think deeply about it."

Other than this, there some other examples that could explain this. For example, when Kiriya was almost touched by Nagase [Aoki]...

"Aoki...you're quite sensitive."

"Because this has to do with the girl I'm obsessed with!"

Aoki looked bright when he spoke those words.

"Even when this happens, you're just like usual."

Taichi couldn't hold himself from speaking.

"Because it's my way of living! It's 'OK when I'm happy at the present'."

"Your living style is enviable."

"Right!" Aoki childishly smiled. This made Taichi smile wryly.

"Hehe, I know what you want to say. After all, after all the personality exchanges and that guy called «Balloon Vine»...the situation we're now in is unpredictable. So you want to say 'please treat this seriously', right?"

"That line should belong to Inaba, right?"

Let me respond to him with a sharp-tongued response first.

"But I can't treat it seriously because my living style is so good and firm it won't be wavered by those things."

"But didn't you say that 'your living style that can't be wavered' is already 'OK when you're happy'?"

"Because my living style represented everything. However my aim, if I use all my strength to accomplish it, I reckon I've already triumphed."

Aoki's asseveration didn't show any signs of being wavered by Taichi's critique.

"If I can live a life where when I die I can still say 'Ah, this is jovial', I'll be happy and satisfied. So if possible, I hope this personality exchange is something that can be handled with a smile. Though this is a wish that may never come true; besides, I've also hurt Yui..."

Could it be that the person in our club who was the closest to reaching the truth of life was Aoki? Of course, Taichi didn't understand the truth, so he couldn't really tell.

Aoki had a sudden realization and shouted.

"Wahh~ Why did I became so serious all of a sudden? This isn't like me."

"Eh, is Aoki actually a magnificent person? I feel a bit sad about this..."

"Right...Wait, isn't it strange for you to be sad about this?"

"No, because all along I thought Aoki was stupid."

"Taichi, you're too evil...Hey! Ah, is it that! Being transcended by someone you have abased all along...is it this feeling?! Crap, it was only Inaba when it began. How did this happen..."

"Speaking of which, I've also been criticised by Inaba as dismal recently."

"Wasn't it usually like that?"

It was quite unusual that he could speak such lines so fluently.

"No...It's more dismal than usual, as she pointed out my mistakes in many places..."

"Heh~It's extraordinary that Taichi would become dismal. You don't look like the kind of person to get obsessed with small matters. Inaba, however, is quite stern...I can hear you out if you want me to."

With a slight hesitation before accepting his good will, Taichi told him how he was criticised by Inaba as a 'fool who loves to sacrifice himself' (Of course he left out the part about Nagase).

"Ha~so that is what happened...Hmmm, Ah~is that so? Oh~oh~"

After listening to Taichi, Aoki showed an expression that showed he completely understood what had happened as he nodded his head.

"Ahah~I can understand why Inaba would say so! Honestly, 'a fool that loves to sacrifice himself' is actually very suitable. Inaba is really something."

"Even Aoki thinks so..."

Taichi felt that he would actually become depressed.

"Aye. Listen to me, Taichi. I think my living style is fine, though some may think that my living style is crappy and I should cherish much more important things. Nevertheless, whatever they say, I wouldn't change what I do! Or I may as well say, honestly, though I pretended to be cool so I said 'my living style won't be wavered by such things', to speak the truth, it should be 'impossible to waver' more than 'won't waver' because I'm this

kind of a person. Humans change incessantly on the surface; still, our 'nature' won't change so easily even when we want it to. Even when the nature of somebody seems to have changed, it's only a change that's restricted to the surface after all. It's just that my nature has a characteristic, which is 'very hard to change on the surface'. That's what it is."

Aoki explained in such an unpredictable way, but at the same time, hit the core of the problem.

Indeed, Aoki didn't seem to have much change even when involved in this strange situation. But it was because he didn't change much that his impression seemed to even fluctuate more than normal people.

"Though just now I started to speak of things that I wouldn't normally say, all I want to say is that 'the problem is to understand yourself and learn your own way of living'. Although changing that personality of self-sacrificing is better, there are things that can only be done with that personality, right? Besides, in most cases, it's hard to change even when you want to, right?"

From what I hear, his words seem to mean giving up some things, but the main point of his words had a definite difference from that of giving up.

In other words, we must accept and confront it with our mind; hence, we can advance forward.

"You...surely are something."

It feels that Aoki had already found something that Taichi and many others must use a lot of time to discover.

"If you speak about this seriously, I'm going to get embarrassed! Or may I say, I think Taichi is much more magnificent. Speaking of 'potential', you're much ahead with it."

"What kind of potential?"

"Aye. It's because you're so chaste you might not know, but it's true—you're really something! It's because of this that you would attain that nickname, 'a fool that loves to sacrifice himself'. How do I say this...the thing with Yui, I feel that you, Taichi, are more capable of handling it. When I realized that, I was unsure of how to face her...I didn't know what to do..."

What would happen after Taichi and the others learned of the secret that Kiriama had been trying to hide all this time? Also, how should we act?

"Yeah...What should we do in order to save Kiriama?"

"As I was saying...you're really something when things like this happen...this is too much for me! Are you trying to save her radically? I'm already having a headache from how I should deal with my relationship with her."

"No, I wasn't thinking of anything this wonderful..."

"It's because you look like you're really going to do it that makes you so fearful...By the way, if things really happen as you say, will Yui become mesmerised by Taichi? Crap, I feel that things will really happen like that!"

Aoki became agonized by his own delusion.



Personality exchange visited Taichi suddenly, like the way it had been normally.

After dinner, Taichi should have been watching the television aimlessly with his sister in the living room.

He lifted his body, which was lying on the bed, sat himself on the bed, and looked around the room.

His vision was vague, as if he were submerged in water. He felt something was about to trickle from his nose, so he quickly sucked it back up; at the same time, he realized his cheeks were all wet. He wiped the tears that trickled down his cheeks with the collar of his pink shirt and stifled his tears.

He didn't quite understand, though, his chest had an intense pain that felt as if it was being squeezed.

It looks like he had exchanged his personality with someone again.

The disparity of his height took Taichi some time to get comfortable with. After that, he got off the bed and looked in a heart-shaped, red-bordered mirror that was on a nearby shelf. He peeked at himself in the mirror.

His eyes and nose were red. His chestnut hair seemed to lack the usual lustre and vitality. His face looked wan, swallow, and even more immature than usual. The face seemed to invoke people to protect its owner.

[Kiryama Yui] was inside the mirror.

— Our condition now is the most serious—a crisis that is filled with absolute desperation!

— Anyone could get hurt or destroyed anytime, or anywhere, by anything that could happen.

Inaba's voice started to ring in Taichi's head.

Only now was Taichi forced to reckon with the effects of the personality exchange.

Did Kiriyama cry non-stop after she had arrived home? Did she cease her tears at one point, but was unable to stop herself from crying and bursting into tears again? Or did she cry because of another reason?

Although I have become [Kiriyama] and am crying in her place, I don't even know the reason why I'm crying. Even though we continually undergo exchanges between our bodies and personalities, it does not mean that we could connect our hearts together.

Taichi wiped his eyes again, lay on the bed, and started to think of what to do. The light shone by the fluorescent lamp was too bright, so he raised his right hand to block the light rays. Though white, and trained in martial arts, his hands, he knew, were too small to block anything.

The tears that Kiriyama shed alone were tears that weren't supposed to be seen by others, though I felt them with my own body in a way that transcended even the closest spy. Was this really all right?

In common sense, this shouldn't be right, because this couldn't happen in normal circumstances.

Nevertheless...

There are also some good things, aren't there?

For example, at least I could bear the pain in her body for her—her chest, her eyes, her nose. Though this was nothing compared to the pain in her heart, still, she, in theory, should be better off than if she had to bear this all by herself.

Was what I thought wrong?

People constantly bemoan their mishaps.

They complain that 'it is all because of this'. They hate what had happened. They dream of a virtual world in which things would not be what they were now. Because if they shirk their wrongs, and say it was impossible for them fix it, they would be forgiven.

That, however, is just an escape. Giving up is what it is called. They seem to have faced the reality, and had thought about it in their minds, though, useless.

However, our trials, we could discover the light inside—this is what we call fighting, isn't it? Moreover, fighting is entirely different from being plainly free and optimistic.

It is different from irresponsibly and optimistically thinking 'things will mend in the end'.

We have to try our best to come up with solutions.

If I were to think like this because of my acknowledgement and understanding of the despair, would Inaba forgive me?

The phone rang with the tone of a music box.

Taichi pushed himself up to search for the source of the sound. He found a light cerise phone on the bed, and quickly grabbed it, confirming the person making the incoming call. The words 'Yaegashi Taichi' were shown on the screen.

He answered the call right away. He had been used to hearing his own voice already, but it still felt strange.

"Hey, is that...Are you Taichi?"

That was the voice of 'Yaegashi Taichi'.

"Yes, you're right."

"Maybe you know already, but I'm Kiriya! And...that...Although I seem to be crying, I wish you...can be not so aware of it...Or I might as well say, please forget it!"

[Taichi]'s sound, which wove his words, sent along Kiriya's strong will.

Hoping for someone to forget something because it was something not meant to be seen—this is expected and normal. If I can divert my attention from this, then I can from the surface, pretend to forget this. But what this would create was only a false stability.

Taichi did not plan to condemn the deed of trying to gain that kind of stableness, because this could achieve stableness upon his eyes. If we don't veil things, there will be too much in the world for us to bear or overcome.

He understood this point.

Nevertheless...

"It's impossible for me to forget."

Taichi knew the truth must be accepted before a step could be advanced.

The scene of KiriYama [Taichi] inhaling over the phone was shown clearly upon his eyes.

"Relatively, wouldn't it be better if KiriYama forgot these tears?"

Taichi continued to speak, but he must think quickly now.

Though he had not come up with any measures to do 'that thing' and plainly spoke out his wish, it was fine to start from now on.

"What does that mean? What are you trying to say...these dumb words..."

KiriYama's [Taichi] voice sounded as if she was crying.

"KiriYama, can we meet a bit later?"

At least he now knew he couldn't solve KiriYama's problem with just his words. So Taichi said he wanted to meet her in person.

Let us advance gradually like this.

We can't confirm what the dark road ahead us looks like; maybe we will fall and get some cuts and scrapes. Or maybe we will step on air and fall off a cliff.

In spite of this, I still believe if we advance, light will await us. It surely is something that only a fool would do.

Nevertheless, I still, certainly, wanted to 'save' KiriYama.

The time now was eight-thirty at night. The sky had already turned all black.

Because Kiriya said 'I don't want to meet in crowded places', we decided to meet in a desolate park that we both knew. The park is somewhere in between our houses, though, a bit far, but we could still get there with our bikes. Despite that we were heading there from unfamiliar places, we could still figure out the road to the park, so it wasn't a big problem.

A Long chair, a see-saw and a sand pit were scattered in the park. The road lamp vaguely lit up these facilities. The park was made as if to remedy the crevices of the housing estates, so it was a bit incommodious for children to play baseball or hide-and-seek here.

During this time, there were almost no pedestrians or cars around. Though it hadn't become a gathering place for juvenile delinquents either. This park existed there solely as if it were long forgotten.

Currently in the park, there were two shadows of people on their bikes.

They belong to Yaegashi Taichi and Kiriya Yui, who had exchanged their personalities.

Although Taichi was a bit afraid that she was still crying, Kiriya [Taichi] had a look of imperturbability. She wore the same clothes Taichi usually wore at home—a crew neck accompanied with a thin blue hooded jacket and sports pants.

"Taichi, sorry...your sister might think this is strange."

Kiriya [Taichi] commenced.

"Hm, what happened?"

In this timing of the day, being frightened was surely inevitable. After all, it happened when she was crying.

"Because it was sudden...though it was usually sudden, I was especially frightened this time...so your sister told me, 'Onii-chan^[5], you have been looking quite weird lately, is there any problem? Do you want to have a check-up in the hospital?'

"...It's already at the stage that I 'should go to the hospital'."

This is bad news, I must think of something to remedy this later.

"Forget it. Let's talk about those things later. Kiriyama—"

"Are you going to talk about the thing that happened today?"

Kiriyama [Taichi] interrupted Taichi [Kiriyama].

"Yeah...the thing that happened today."

"Just when Taichi exchanged with me, Aoki phoned me and said he wanted to say some things in detail with me when we met; but then he wanted to say some things real quick and started to apologise like mad...He apologised a great number of times."

While Taichi was still deciding on what to do, Aoki seemed to have really put them into action.

"It's all because me...From now on, Aoki and Taichi will specially care for my feelings...When I thought about this, I felt that I'm good-for-nothing...Furthermore, maybe I can't laugh with you guys like we did before...When I thought about this, I felt sad and I cried. Sorry...I'm too weak."

Though her appearance was [Taichi], her body exuded a sense of transience and sadness that felt like Kiriya. Taichi thought that it was an atmosphere he couldn't make himself.

"So stop saying 'sorry'. I think Kiriya has no need to apologise...But let me say it once...Sorry."

Although there were many things to say, Taichi thought there wasn't a need to list them out one by one.

Taichi didn't know if Kiriya [Taichi] really agreed with him. Kiriya just plainly nodded her assent and replied with a 'Mmm'.

"Eh, so...Kiriya, you have androphobia, right?"

After he spoke, Taichi [Kiriya] discovered his words were far heavier than he expected. They were too heavy for one to bear.

"...Mmm. There isn't a problem with normal chatting unless there were some unnecessary intimacies or touching...then it would get uncomfortable—something like shivering."

'Hahaha'—Kiriya [Taichi] lightly laughed. Her laughter seemed as if trying to convince herself 'it was not a big deal' and trying to paralyse herself.

"When did it start...There should be some reason behind it, right? If you don't mind, could you tell me?"

Taichi [Kiriya] stood upright and stared right at [Taichi's] eyes as if trying to convey his entire message through his words.

Kiriya [Taichi] lightly laughed and took her eyes off Taichi.

"Taichi really stepped into my affair right away."

"Do you have a problem?"

"No, but I'm worried."

Kiriyama [Taichi] vaguely spoke with a dark look—an implication that Taichi couldn't understand.

"Nevertheless...this is what you, Taichi, would do...If it is Taichi, it's fine to tell you! On that note, the only person in school except Inaba who has heard of my mentioning of the incident is Taichi."

Kiriyama [Taichi] said with a slightly brighter tone, then bowed like a clown.

"Or I should say, though the foreword took me so long, it isn't something so appalling. If only taking account of the incident, it is nothing special—it is a frequent thing that you can find anywhere."

After mentioning the premises, Kiriyama [Taichi] commenced.

"That happened when I was in middle school—I was almost attacked by a boy—but it isn't really serious! After all, he 'almost' attacked me. He didn't really do anything to me; and before that, I had already resisted him and escaped."

Kiriyama [Taichi] continued without looking at Taichi.

"If I were to say the thing that shocked me...I'm quite a vigorous karate girl, right? So I was quite confident in my own skills. Starting from primary school, I'd never lost to any boys in fights, so I always reckon if I were attacked I'd retaliate. But, when I was really in that condition, things weren't as I wished—I could only escape...Do you know? The power of men is extremely huge, so

huge it's close to despair for girls. Then I thought, 'Ahah, I can never win against boys.'"

Kiriyama [Taichi] lifted her head and looked at the night sky. Taichi [Kiriyama] followed her and looked up. The first quarter moon hung on the dark sky—it was exactly a half moon.

"Until now, though I've lost a few times to elder opponents in my battles, I've never had a thought like 'I won't win against this person even if I spent my whole lifetime training'. But against normal boys I could find anywhere, this thought grew in me. At that time, it was when boys gradually overtook the girls in their growth stage. It was because these things stacked together that whenever I thought of 'girls could never win against boys' and started to become scared. Then I started to think that boys and girls are different creatures and I became more scared. When I had the cognition of the disparity of boys and girls, I would start to come up with any disparity between them. Finding those disparities made me even more scared...I am such a fool."

"You're not a fool—having those thoughts are not strange ."

Of course, Taichi, as a boy, did not plan to say something presumptuous like 'I can sympathise with you'; still, he could imagine what happened.

"...Anyways, it's because of the incident that boys became entirely alien in my heart. There was a time when I would feel sick even when getting close to boys. That time, however, was short, and I can normally chat and play. But, body contact and in extremelly short distances, I will still...To be more specific, when I notice the fact that 'he (a boy) is offensive, and has entered a

distance I couldn't handle', a strong sense of reaction would grow inside of me."

"That is to say...the distance you usually use to communicate with us is the distance you can handle even if you are attacked?"

"At least it's a distance I can parry."

In theory, Taichi should have frequently come to a distance of normal conversation with her.

"What is this because of...Although I don't think that the incident of me being attacked became the trauma itself...But it certainly is because of that time when I was held by my wrists, and he overpowered me, so my subconscious thought that 'I would lose when boys got hold of me'...It was undoubtedly my problem, but I don't understand at all—how strange this is."

This was what happened—Kiryama [Taichi] bowed at the end to finish off her role as the clown.

Her trauma seemed to burn deeper than expected, and was in a position hard to observe.

In Kiriyama's heart, though she would not intentionally avoid 'males', her instincts seemed to have taken them as a dangerous existence—in other words, even though she understood it was not the case, her body couldn't act the way she wished. It was not an ideal situation for her to overcome the incident.

—Overcoming it...Taichi thought of this at once. Would Aoki and Inaba criticise him as an optimist for having such thoughts?

No matter what happens, the first thing to do is to relax my mood.

"Eh, Kiriyaama, how would you want to deal with this? That is...the thing about androphobia."

Though he should not have asked, Taichi still wanted to clarify.

"About this...I don't really want to comment on this."

Kiriyaama [Taichi] frowned and smiled wryly—showing a vexed look. Taichi had also seen this look before—he should have seen [Kiriyaama] herself having this look.

"Is it all right if you could just say what you hope it will become?"

"But..."

This time she made an entirely vexed look. She wanted to speak but she couldn't.

"I need your help."

Taichi [Kiriyaama] said firmly.

"—This is the problem."

Kiriyaama [Taichi] pointed out the problem concisely and sharply and sighed. That sigh contained more than just surprise or refusal; it was something close to gentleness.

"Saying those things to Taichi is equal to saying 'help me'."

Was it because of her existence in my body—an existence like a doppelgänger, that her words clutched the part of my heart that was least exposed?

—Is that my 'nature'?

"Is this wrong?"

"It's not wrong...but I don't like it. It makes me feel bad when I trouble other people because of my weakness..."

Kiriyama [Taichi] smiled wryly, like she was extremely troubled.

Seeing her, Taichi thought, 'Humans are such annoying creatures.'

Although they both were thinking for each other, they could not understand each other; so gentleness always easily brushed past them. Even if one thinks it was kindness, the other one may think of it as a complete opposite.

Although their personalities exchanged with their bodies, and being so close to each other, this point didn't change much; because 'the human heart' cannot be seen—if we don't say it, no one will know.

So, say it!

Say it and march forward!

"In my opinion, it will be troublesome if Kiriyama still has androphobia."

Taichi also felt what he said was a bit too stern.

But it certainly will become like this if the truth has to be said.

So he said it.

It didn't really matter if Kiriyama had androphobia. We can solve the problem gradually by protecting her at her side and giving her warmth. This way, even though the problem might not be solved, we can still maintain peace on the surface.

But Taichi already said it was 'troublesome' so he couldn't change his plan now. If he couldn't solve it, failure was the only thing waiting for him.

As expected, Kiriya [Taichi] quivered agitatedly while anger filled in her body.

"What you said...isn't that too much? I didn't want it to become like this! I already think that this is repugnant! And you even say this is troublesome—"

"So, let me help you."

"What—"

"You also said clearly you don't like it."

Let us stop using any safe measures and confront it head-on.

This isn't denying the fact, but accepting it and throwing myself into battle.

"What...does that mean? What happened to you...No more of your meddling, please."

Kiriya [Taichi] stood still and said with shivering sounds.

In Taichi's opinion, obstacles that haven't been tackled until now cannot be tackled if we don't face it. Even if there are high risks we must walk past this path—this was his way of doing this—a way that couldn't be and wouldn't be changed.

And more importantly, Taichi had thought of something.

If there are 'things that only happen under this condition', there should also be 'things that could only be done under this condition'.

"Kiryama, you are scared of being suppressed by the strength of boys and being hopeless on what to do; in other words, you are scared of being clinched on, and beaten if the opponent uses brute force, right?"

"Eh? Ri, right."

"Also, Kiriyama, though your brain knows, you can't act the way you want...Although you don't know whether it was your body or your subconscious—so in short you have grown some sort of repulsive reaction—is this what you said?"

Taichi [Kiryama] slowly shortened his distance with Kiriyama [Taichi].

"Right...oh and why are you keep getting closer to me?"

"In other words, if you let your subconscious understand that it isn't really something to get clinched by boys, you can overcome your androphobia—this explanation is correct, right?"

"...In simple terms, maybe it is...Hey, your eyes look a bit dangerous."

Their distance was so short they could already hear the sounds of each other's breathing if they paid attention.

Although accounting from the students in the first year of highschool, Taichi's height was only a bit taller than the average, when Taichi reevaluated [his body] from [Kiryama's] perspective, his body felt really large.

"From now on, I'm going to tell you 'you will never lose to boys' with my body. This is called shock therapy, are you prepared for it?"

"Umm...From just then you looked a bit dangerous...And it feels even more scary to get approached by [myself]."

As she had said, Kiriyaama [Taichi] cowered and stepped back, her face stretched tight.

"So hand it to me, Kiriyaama. Now, try holding on to [my body]."

"Okay, good."

Kiriyaama [Taichi] hold on to Taichi's [Kiriyaama's] left shoulder with a shudder.

After hearing someone else's past and having such consciousness, Taichi [Kiriyaama] felt uncomfortable when [Taichi], as a boy, touched him...Taichi did have that kind of feeling.

Kiriyaama [Taichi] spied Taichi's face with an uneasy look. Taichi [Kiriyaama] then showed a smile deliberately.

He sucked in some air and prepared himself.

Although he would torture his [body], it didn't really matter.

So let me show this to Kiriyaama!

Taichi [Kiriyaama] aimed at Kiriyaama's [Taichi's] 'important body part' and used his knee to kick heavily at it.

The soft 'part' on the knee transformed and twisted.

"Ouch!"

Taichi [Kiriyaama] screamed for no reason.

Although it was not an attack of full power (when he thought of the pain, he could not use his full power), the accuracy of the aim was so brilliant that the kicker also felt a bit scared.

"You...!"

Kiriyama [Taichi] screamed deep down from his throat, but no sound was heard. She seemed to lose her conscious and bent her body, not keeping a defensive posture anymore and was straight-facing him.

...Is she dead? Taichi thought about it seriously.

No, no problem; she is still moving.

Kiriyama [Taichi], was moaning sounds Taichi had rarely heard in his life (or even never heard) like 'Uwa~' or 'Gwa~' or 'Wuha', kneeled down on the floor and scraping the floor with her left hand; maybe it was because of nausea that she used her other hand to cover her mouth.

Taichi's [Kiriyama's] face also twitched. After all, it was bad to look at [his body] suffering from such immense pain. Of course, compared to the hell-like pain Kiriyama was suffering, that was nothing.

Kiriyama's [Taichi] actions slowly calmed down. She was now cowered on the floor and breathing potently in and out.

Taichi [Kiriyama] saw this chance and squatted down beside Kiriyama.

"Look, Kiriyama. You can knock the opponent out in one hit through this, right?"

Kiriyama [Taichi] vibrantly lifted her head and stared at Taichi [Kiriyama] harshly. Beads of sweat were on her forehead and her eyes were filled with tears.

"You...you...however the circumstance...you should be clear...of what to do...and what not."

"But through this—"

Just when Taichi was about to say the gist—

At first, he thought it was a joke.

Taichi lifted his head and saw [Kiryama] in front of him. Until now, he should have been [Kiryama], who was looking down on to [Taichi's body].

This means that

—it returned to normal? At the same moment when Taichi understood this, there was a sharp pain coming between his legs.

"Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch!"

It's transformed, definitely! Taichi thought.

He quickly pressed on to his abdomen with his hands and shook his body back and forth to slightly relieve the pain.

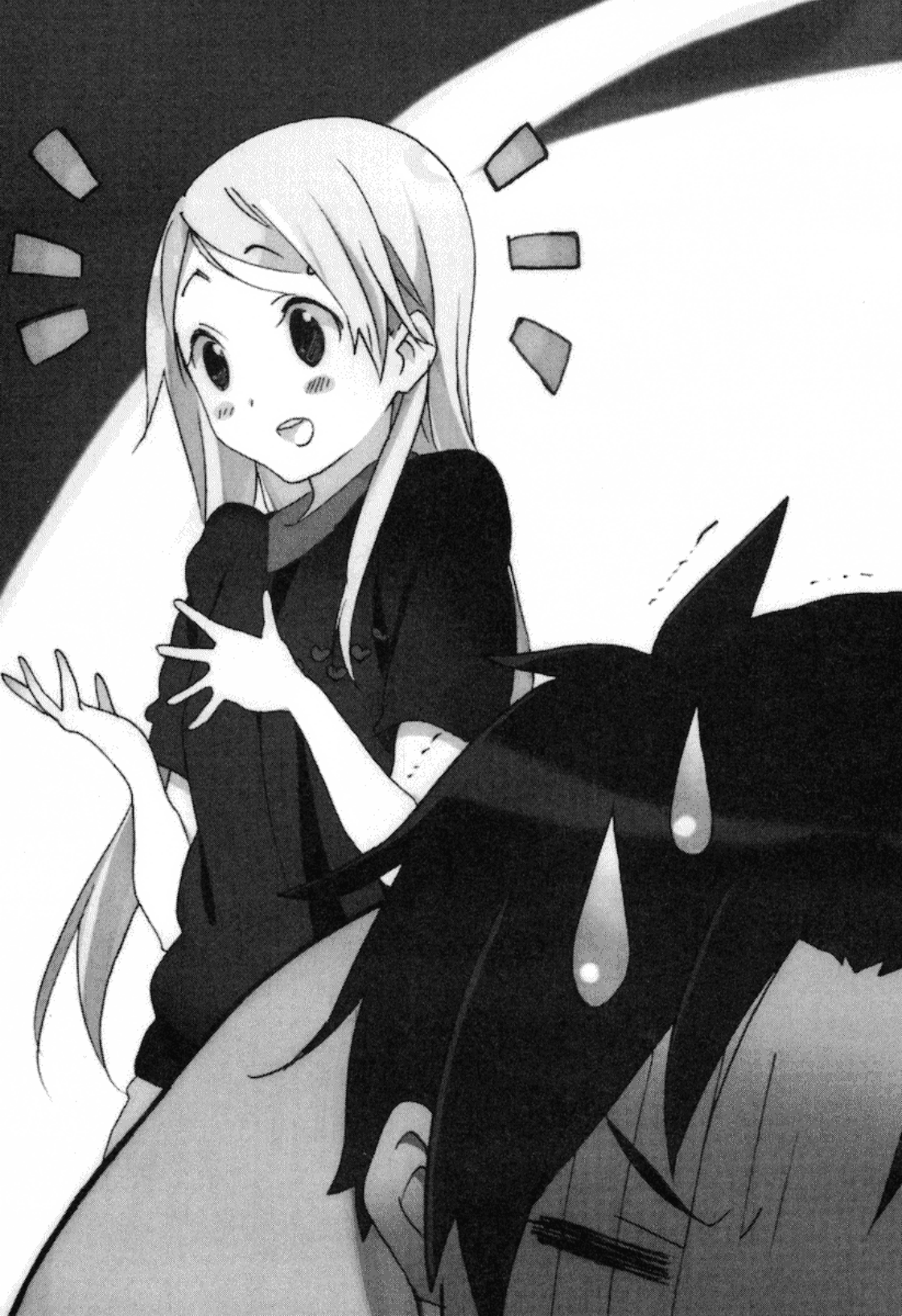
Nevertheless, his resistance was unavailing—it was even like using fog to exterminate fire. Taichi's eyes rushed with tears anew.

"Hm? Eh? Ah, I'm back to myself! Haha, you're condemned!"

"Now it's insignificant."

Taichi couldn't speak normally for now.

"What's the 'significance'? Significance! Phew~ this could be my most painful experience in my life...I thought I would die with the pain...weird...? Eh, Taichi, someone is coming this way."



Even though hearing Kiriyaama's scared voice, Taichi didn't have any mood to care about it, the only thing he is thinking is how to endure through this intense pain—

"Eh, listen to me! That person is walking here directly. Quick, run away...! Though we're not doing anything bad, if someone spots us in this dismal condition, it will be troublesome; so, let's get outta here...!"

After all, moans and screams sounded out from here just then, so Kiriyaama has a point, but—

"Then...please leave me alone...get away...I think I can't stand it anymore..."

"Why are you acting like 'the cliché drama of those action movies'? Ah! Stand up, quick!"

Though Taichi did not mean to act this way.

"No, I think I maybe can't stand it...Besides, I don't think I can stand up by myself..."

"What are you guys doing!"

A sound came from afar. The reproachful sound seemed to belong to a female.

"Rats! Oh man, please stand up now!"

Kiriyaama potently pulled the sleeves of Taichi's hooded jacket, trying to lift him up; and so he was lifted—though still with a bent back.

"Ouch Ouch Ouch, please, let me rest..."

"Be quiet! Pull yourself together and run!"

Kiriyama stayed with her pose and began to run, dragging Taichi with her.

"Wuaahhhh...!"

It was an appalling horsepower—a post-karate girl genius indeed.

"Heeahhhhh!"

Kiriyama shouted to increase her enthusiasm and also the turning speed of her legs and the pulling force of her arms, which were still pulling Taichi...In the end, they used twenty minutes to escape.

When they got back on their feet, they had already run to the town's largest river.

"Kiri, Kiriyama...! It's...all right now..."

Taichi said, panting hard. He had already met his limits.

Kiriyama took him and ran over a fairly long distance. The female who thought they were suspicious seemed to have not chased them (though from the start she didn't plan to chase them).

"Eh? Ah, right."

Kiriyama finally stopped her footsteps and breathed hard. Her small breasts shook with her deep breaths, which were fast, but rhythmic—She even seemed poised.

Taichi sucked in some air, pacified his heart, and sent it to his head. He had something he must say now.

"Kiriyama...Look at your left hand."

He told Kiriyama.

"Eh?"

Kiriyama moved her vision slowly to her left hand.

Her left hand was gripping tightly onto Taichi's right hand.

During their run, Kiriyama seemed to have subconsciously moved her hand from the sleeves to Taichi's hand. It was certainly not convenient to pull someone by his or her sleeves and run.

"Eh...Could it be?"

Kiriyama immediately loosened her grip, embraced her chest and stepped two to three steps backward.

"Kiriyama...Look...Isn't this all right?"

Taichi said with a smile.

"It's because...I was running for my life, so I will...Besides, if it was Tai, Taichi...this was also relevant."

Kiriyama diverted her vision to aside and rubbed her left hand with her right hand with a flushed face.

"But now we can confirm that...at least...Kiriyama's androphobia...isn't an obstacle that can't be overcome."

Although from the very first, he already knew that being prepared solemnly and stirringly could solve any problems.

Because...didn't Kiriyama and Gotou, who was possessed by «Balloon Vine», have a fight before?

Although those conditions were because of emergencies that broke her inner limits, it had already proved that this wasn't impossible.

Taichi's breath finally calmed down.

"Besides...the low blow was very effective, right?"

Kiriyama's face and ears became red all in a sudden.

"Right! This was what happened! What is with you? You should have some more ideas! Also, if you were to act, please tell me beforehand, okay?"

"Didn't I tell you? This is a shock therapy—didn't it work very well?"

"Why does a girl like me have to experience the pain of guy's trauma? Uwaghh~ Thanks to you, even when I came back to [my own body], that feeling was still creeping over me...I hate you~~! How can I say such erotic things like this...! I...I want to die instead!"

She looked like she played happily.

"Fine, calm down. Kiriyama."

"I-It's all because of Taichi that things ended up like this!"

Kiriyama spoke out of tone with all her might. Her wet eyes and flushed face made a cute look on her—so cute people couldn't help but to fondle her head. Taichi wanted to say this in a moment, but he felt that Kiriyama would scream because of this so he decided to keep it to himself.

"Haha, haha"—Kiriyama agitatedly breathed. After a while, she recommenced.

"But that move deals so much pain...that attack...would every boy become like that?"

"Yeah, I'm not an exception. Please don't worry."

"...Oh, I understand. Mmm...If a boy were to be hit with that, he could do nothing about it...Although I knew this in theory, I didn't expect it to hurt so much...Mmm...Only one strike and I can win for sure..."

Kiriyama started to confirm her knee kicking and punching poses (with no specific reason).

"...It works in whatever pose you are if you are not held at the back or being pressed on the floor...Hmm...Simply being clinched on wouldn't be a problem..."

Of course, the move she will use will always be set to aim for 'the weakest point in men'.

"Did I...make a scary weapon that would make every man in the world to fear...?"

Kiriyama let go of her hands and disarmed her pose—seemingly, she was satisfied—

"I will practice at home later on."

—No way, she seemed to want to be even stronger...this is getting scary.

"But, this move will deal much pain, so it is very dangerous...Eh...Taichi, why would you want to help me to this stage...? And also to the point to damage [your own body]..."

The autumn wind blew Kiriyama's chestnut long hair, which Kiriyama played with while waiting for her answer with a melancholy look—a look that had much so much meaning Taichi couldn't speculate.

But even being inquired so seriously and trying to think of the answer anew, what came to Taichi's mind were plainly words.

"Because I want to, is this answer all right?"

Taichi tried to answer with a serious look on his face. Kiriyaama couldn't help but to laugh at him.

"...It's Taichi, indeed."

Kiriyaama approached Taichi step by step after speaking.

She then raised her left fist at her front and puffed at it.

The fist sounded lightly and stuck somewhere near Taichi's heart.

—Her first was trembling.

But Kiriyaama smiled gleefully at Taichi. Her smile was so bright it could save people who looked at it. Then she said.

"Thanks, Taichi."

March forward, Kiriyaama.

Taichi supported her spiritually.

Chapter 7 : Finale and Another Starting Point

Next morning, Yaegashi Taichi knew the witness of his and Kiriya's turbulence yesterday in a completely unexpected place.

That was because the president of Class 1C—Fujishima Maiko directly inquired Taichi, "Were you with a girl in a park yesterday night?" It was alleged that the park was part of the walking route of Fujishima's dog (a bulldog).

"W-What are you saying, Fujishima? I didn't go there yesterday."

Of course, Taichi decided to get away with it. Taichi felt he was in some ill-fated relationship with Fujishima lately.

"...Really? Wasn't Yaegashi-kun and a petite long-haired girl bunching up at the park yesterday?"

"We didn't bunch up."

"**We** didn't bunch up...?"

Fujishima's eyes behind her spectacles brightened up sharply.

"N-No. That was a mere grammatical problem."

"...Oh~? Maybe I didn't see very clear because of the dim sky. I might have mistook you; if that's the case, I'm sorry for my accusation."

Although he didn't want to set Fujishima up, Taichi felt remorseful for lying to her and letting her apologise for it.

"...I thought I saw an extra-marital affair..."

Fujishima turned her head to a side and said lowly.

There were much in her words to be angry at, so this relieved Taichi's remorse.

"Forget it. Right, I want to ask you...Yaegashi-kun, have you been a bit weird lately?"

"Oh! Is it so...? I was like this before."

"Oh...Also, Inaba-san and Nagase-san seemed a bit weird too! And you guys belong to the same club, so as the president (of the class), I want to know what happened."

"...Nothing happened. Mmm...After all, our first year have already passed a half, our relationships turned good so we showed different facets of ourselves...Is this what happened?"

"Really? Then it's good...Well, I will be sure to catch Yaegashi-kun's handle; after that, you're doomed."

Pointing to Taichi to emphasize, Fujishima left. Maybe I should seriously consider correcting her misunderstood aspects.

This moment, Nagase Iori came by and seized the seat in front of Taichi.

She fixed her eyes at Taichi for no apparent reason.

"...Was that not Taichi? A petite long-haired girl...Is this Yui?"

"Y-You heard all of that? Ayahh, there are petite long-haired girls everywhere..."

Being seen his getting away, Taichi could only defend himself to dispatch her.

"If that's it, then leave it. It has no business with me even if he was Taichi or not...That girl...was she just saying?"

Pouting her lips, Nagase didn't seem to have a good mood.

If there weren't anything special, all the Literature Club members gathered in the clubroom right after school. The only way to prevent most troubles is by putting the five personality-exchanging people in one room.

What they do in the room is different—Inaba Himeko worked on the computer as usual; Nagase was reading manga; Kiriya had been making beads lately; Taichi was doing revision and preparing for his lessons; Aoki was left doing nothing but interfering others—I wish someone would play with him.

That day, Taichi worked on his schoolwork in a pace to get it to become a habit; Aoki also paid heed to his schoolwork (maybe it was because he needed to hand in a report the day after). Inaba peeked at the two, and continued typing on the keyboard.

After a while Nagase and Kiriya entered the clubroom

"Hi~!"

Nagase threw her bag on the sofa, and headed to the sofa.

She shouted "Hi, Taichi!" on her way and slapped Taichi on his back.

"...Why are you using that 'this is the first time we met today!' kind of way to greet me? We've just seen each other fifteen minutes ago."

"But by this atmosphere, I feel like meeting for the first time today."

"I didn't say anything, Shouldn't this be a problem of your feelings?"

This girl is so carefree...This may even be enviable in Taichi's eyes.

"Hi...Taichi!"

This time the same part of his back was slapped even harder.

"Ouch!"

Taichi couldn't help to scream and turn his head, only to see Kiriyaama, standing in front of him, embarrassedly smiling,

"...Yo, Kiriyaama"

Taichi replied with a smile.

They looked at their faces for a while. At the same time, Kiriyaama kept slapping Taichi's back.

"...It's okay to stop now."

Being said, Kiriyaama stopped her combo. Taichi was sure his back had turned red.

"Let me tell you, Taichi. I may become interested in martial arts and professional wrestling; let's talk more on this when I'm free."

Kiriyaama said with a weak voice, as if clenching her teeth while she spoke.

"Hand it to me! If you need it, we can start now—"

"Not n-now...Wait for next time!"

Kiriyaama swung her head potently and ceased Taichi who was agitatedly coming forward.

There was no need to be so kind, Taichi thought.

Looking at Kiriyaama, Taichi suddenly felt that her loving of cute things had something to do with her androphobia...maybe wanting to escape to a world man cannot enter.

At this moment, Taichi found out the other three persons—Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki was all looking at him with awe.

"...What happened between Taichi and Yui?"

Aoki asked with an expression becoming stern.

"Eh, about that..."

Taichi spied at Kiriyaama and pondered what to start with.

"Nothing! Nothing at all!"

Flushed and denying in a flurry, Kiriyaama briskly sat down on the seat diagonally across that of Taichi and started to search for things in her bag.

The three stared straight at her for a while.

After that, Aoki turned his head and examined Taichi's and Kiriyaama's face.

Nagase covered half of her face with a manga while lightly staring at Taichi.

The atmosphere was quite embarrassing.

Taichi, however, couldn't tell them what Kiriyaama doesn't want them to know, so he coughed two times and faced the table anew.

Kiriyaama also seemed to feel the embarrassing atmosphere, so she said,

"I-I'm going to the washroom!"

and escaped from the clubroom.

Seeing her leave, Nagase commenced,

"..I just saw Yui went to the washroom."

"What is going on, Taichi! Did something really happen yesterday? I feel that Yui is different from herself yesterday in our phone call."

Aoki asked promptly.

"No-nothing great that I did! We just...had a chat about her troubles. Aoki, you also have contacted Yui. That was much what happened."

"Just had a chat"—How can that make your relationship so well?! I had no idea...Crap, Is Taichi surely my biggest rival? And it is threatening that you having no consciousness of this...!"

Aoki moaned of his distress.

"If that is the case...Iori! Let's start a battle meeting!"

"I-I should have no relation with this whatsoever. Or I might as well say this has nothing to do with me!"

Nagase moaned with Aoki. This time Inaba, at the front, threw herself in.

"Honestly, What happened between you two?"

Although reluctant, Taichi could feel 'I won't let you get away that easily' from Inaba's eyes.

"Ayahh...I didn't really do much! It was only giving Kiriya a little push and she marched onwards by herself."

Yes, this was the only thing that happened.

Inaba blinked a few times in surprise and smiled lightly.

"So...maybe this personality exchange can be helpful! But maybe it was Taichi so such miracle could be made."

She looked as though she had a myriad of thoughts.

Smiling at Taichi calmly again, Inaba leant on the back of the chair, gazed at the sky, and covered her eyes with her right hand, muttering,

"To me, ...all I could see were loopholes."

Inaba looked abnormally weak.

Later Taichi immediately knew his instincts were right.

It was because on that day—Inaba collapsed.

"So, let me do some things while you sleep here obediently. If Mr.Gotou comes here before I come back, help me to greet him."

That being said, Yamada Touka (30 years old, divorced once), the nursing teacher, left the Health Room.

"Inaban...I thought you were dead..."

"Idiot, I was only dizzy. I won't die yet."

Lying on the bed, Inaba replied to Nagase, who was still worried and looked almost weeping, lightly. From her falling down in the clubroom to being carried to the Health Room, Nagase seemed to waver extremely.

"Yah, scared the hell out of me...You really collapsed in a **bong!**"

Kiriyama also showed an extremely worn out expression.

"My body has been a bit bad lately...But it isn't a big deal. In fact, there was no need to come to the Health Room."

"No, Inaba! You have to care for your own body!"

Being denounced by Aoki (and maybe this was the first time), Inaba, with an annoyed look, only said, "Yes. Yes." to dispatch him.

After some time, the class teacher of Class 1C and also the advisor of the Literature Club...In other words, the manager of all things that are related to Inaba in the school, Gotou Ryusen, came to the Health Room.

"Hey~ Inaba~ Are you all right? Oh, everyone is here."

A student collapsed—how could he speak so easily.

"I've given you much trouble, Gotou. You can now return."

"...You should give more respect to teachers...Leave it."

He didn't really care.

"Eh~ Where is Ms. Yamada?"

"She is busy...Eh, according to her, "the reason why Inaba collapsed is because she accumulated too much stress, so she would be fine with enough rest."

"Understood, Yaegashi. So, what's the case now, Inaba?"

"No problem."

Inaba declared without hesitation.

"Then...If that's what Ms. Yamada said, then there's no problem. Eh~ It's rare that you five are all here, do you have anything to say...Mmm?"

"Ah!

Kiriyama yelled as if something came to her mind.

"...I didn't make this week's «Bunken News»..."

" " " "Ah!" " " " "

The four members of the Literature Club left screamed together.

Seemingly, they gathered together every day in the name of the Literature Club, but they could completely forget the work of the club...the sole work that let others to confirm the existence and significance of the club.

Then Gotou also screamed.

"Ah, well, actually, I didn't get your draft before the usual deadline."

"Sorry, Gotou. It's because we're busy in a large-scale interview recently. It looks like our draft this week won't get before the deadline. Next month we will add more juice to it, okay?"

Inaba immediately got away with it. How could she lie so easily?

"A large-scale interview, uh? But «Bunken News» are made monthly to gain the club's recognition...Forget it."

He didn't really care.

Only at these times did Taichi want to thank Gotou for his sloppiness.

After that, although she rejected our kindness, we still decided to take her home in case anything happens. Because Inaba proposed "four persons to take me home is too annoying! At least make it two!" So only Taichi and Nagase who won the scissor-paper-rock game took her home.

The three of them chatted randomly while changing to trams, going to the nearest station from Inaba's house, and the 10-minute walk to Inaba's house. Though she didn't look well, Inaba still acted like nothing had happened.

"So, it's about time you make yourself clear. Taichi, what happened between you and Kiriya yesterday?"

Inaba suddenly said on their way.

"What is **what**! There was no relation."

"The relation doesn't matter. In short, if you don't tell me, I'll be very annoyed and might even collapse in agony~"

Inaba weakly leaned onto Taichi and passing her arm into his shoulder, exactly like a troublesome drunkard.

"Hm, using your body as a bargain...that is too cunning..."

"Besides~Iori, you also care, right?"

"Yeah, as good friends of they two, I have an obligation to know."

Seeing Nagase speaking with an intended tone, Inaba whispered "Yah?" and felt puzzled. It looked like Nagase's reaction was different from that of her expectation.

"...Ah, it's not that strange...forget it. Look, Iori also said it."

"But Kiriya doesn't want to say it..."

"Ah~ you are getting annoying! If it was something not nice to ask, we wouldn't. However I look at it, I think it could be heard. So, tell us!"

"Y-Yeah. If you don't tell, I may also get hurt badly and feel bad of the bonds of us five...and then lay sick on a bed~"

"E-Even Iori wants to hear it so badly. Hey!"

"As...she say so, I also..."

It was Nagase who was accompanying Inaba; but Inaba weakened her voice and didn't continue to talk. She showed an expression of depression...Was her body unwell again? But it looks like it was not the case.

Taichi wanted to ask Inaba about this, but before he did, Inaba quickly changed back to her usual look.

"In conclusion, if you don't tell us, I will shout 'Ayahh~ He is a pervert~!'"

...It looked like I can't withstand them anymore.

Taichi didn't mention the details. He only concisely told them what he did that let Kiriya overcome her trauma.

"Bahahahaha, how did you think of that?! 'A fool that loves to sacrifice himself'...that is some surprising shock therapy! Nyaaa~ I'm impressed."

Inaba's reaction was as expected.

But Nagase's reaction was different from Inaba, which made Taichi puzzled.

"...Though I know Yui are not good in handling boys...I couldn't imagine that it was so serious a phobia which she couldn't even touch boys...Did I really not find this out..."

Nagase drooped her head and swung it. Her silky hair became a total mess.

"I can't even...become someone's friend...once and for all..."

Did she really have to say it to this point?

What caused her to dig so deep?

Although Taichi didn't know the reason, he said,

"Nagase, listen to me."

Taichi spied Nagase's look, only to see her vibrantly lifting up her head. After confirming her watery eyes, that were as beautiful as jewels and reflecting his own image, he spoke to her.

"I think the most unwilling thing that Kiriya wants...is to see someone agonized, worried or embarrassed for her matters."

It was because I saw the crying face of Kiriya when Aoki apologised to her, Taichi thought.

"So Nagase, please don't worry too much. Treat Kiriya the same as before. If you do, Kiriya will be more than glad."

This method should also be used onto Taichi.

"Same as before...is referring to...?"

That was a shivering voice as if asking for help.

"Same as before...same as before...No, there's no need to think it so hard. Nagase, treat her with no preconceptions then it's fine. Only that...will make KiriYama happy!"

"Is it really fine...to KiriYama?"

"Yeah, it's enough."

It was not to comfort her. Taichi believed it deeply.

"Kukuku, you two surely are fit."

Inaba interrupted.

"You both need each other, this can't be wrong."

"I-Inaban! Can you stop your incessant nonsense?"

"Hmm? Incessant...?"

This part made Taichi a bit aware.

"So I was saying! Inaban also said Taichi and I are...a...'perfect combination'."

Inaba told Taichi something about how he and Iori fit; maybe she also told Iori the same thing, so Iori's attitude become a bit strange?

"Actually you are a 'perfect combination'; this can't be helped...Ah~ But Yui must have already been mesmerised by Taichi."

"Baha!"

Taichi puffed .

"I-Inaban...You said it too directly..."

"This is the fact. There is nothing I could do about it. The trickiest thing about fools who love to sacrifice themselves is that their personalities always mesmerise people, right? After all, willing to help one to do anything will easily cause misunderstandings. Long words put short, Taichi, please don't hurt Iori or Yui. If you do, I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget...And don't forget kindness will sometimes hurt others."

"About this...I understand."

Taichi bowed to Inaba.

"But if you would become a triangular relationship...Ahah, will adding Aoki become a quadrilateral relationship?...If your relationships don't get so entangled, it's fine with me."

She was now in mode that she would speak whatever she wanted.

While they were chatting idly, they had already arrived to Inaba's house. Although Inaba said they didn't have to follow her to the end, Taichi and Nagase still insisted to walk with her all the way to the door of her house.

"Sorry for giving you all the trouble, Taichi and Iori."

"Please don't. Have a good and quiet rest."

"Speaking of which, Inaba, no matter what time you are thinking for us; but now you should really forget about us and care for your body."

"I'm fine...I'm fine."

Inaba took her eyes off them and smiled wryly. Her smile also carried some auto-sadism.

She walked through a luxurious western garden and headed to the gate...but she turned her head back on her way and said in an extremely intentional tone,

"Oh~ right. I almost forgot to say...Iori, let Taichi solve your trauma."

Although her words are thrown out without any foreshadowing, still, if we look at Iori's stunned look, we can fully understand this was an extremely important issue.

"Inaban...Didn't we had consensus that we won't mention it to anyone else...?"

Iori, with an icy look as beautiful as an ice sculpture, spoke in a cold voice that could freeze our backs.

Seeing Nagase's look, Taichi was hit off base.

"Taichi, if you can help her, please do."

Inaba's straight shadow vanished into the house. At the last moment, indeed, she was still caring for the affairs of others.

So they would have to go to the station and say goodbye after they had sent Inaba home...But there was a strange atmosphere between Taichi and Nagase.

It was all because of Inaba's last words.

Should I ask her or not? Should I face it or not? Should I resist it or not?

Honestly, Taichi could only see one answer.

"Hey, Nagase, what is your trauma?"

Though being inquired, Nagase gave no response and started to walk quicker.

Taichi didn't continue and fell silent.

Did she plan to not tell anything about this? If she did, then I should stop asking—when Taichi made up his thought, Nagase commenced,

"Inaba is too capricious! Though I know she did it for us and also her words are mostly right..."

Nagase didn't meet her eyes with Taichi and stayed looking at the front.

"Does Taichi want to now about my case? If you promise me you will treat me as before no matter whatever you heard, I'll tell you."

As if scared of looking at Taichi's look, Nagase completely turned away from him. Her face was as fragile as a glass that seemed to break even if touched slightly.

What happened to Nagase that others didn't know?

Taichi couldn't estimate how abysmal and dark her real side was, but he felt that if he went too deep he would get in danger; because once you spied in the dark, you couldn't act as if nothing had happened.

Nevertheless, however high the risk was—

"I understand. I promise you. I want to give my efforts if it is something I can handle."

If I do not accept it, I could not do anything about it.

—not even able to think for others on their side.

—lest I could save them because it would be impossible.

"Taichi would say like this indeed."

That being said, Nagase finally soothed her tenseness and showed a compassionate but a bit wry smile—a smile that was familiar, a smile that Kiriama had also shown, a smile that conveyed a sense of mystery.

"Do you want to sit down for a while?"

Nagase suggested. Taichi agreed and they sat on the low concrete wall near the parking lot.

Nagase straightened her legs. "Yahhh~" She sighed deeply.

"I don't want to say this, and I know I shouldn't...but after being said by Inaban, if I don't tell you, you would feel anxious and annoyed, right?"

"Furthermore, Inaba even said 'if you can help, please do', if I tell you I'm not anxious I'm just lying."

"So I was saying~~" Nagase said while kicking the pebbles around her feet. The pebbles bounced forward but deviated to the right and fell down into the drain.

"So, let me tell you."

Nagase fixed her black pearl-like eyes on Taichi. This was the first time Taichi knew that when a beautiful and flawless face shows an utter poker face, humans would become awe-stricken. Nagase looks like confirming some existence deep in Taichi's eyes, and then began to speak.

"...But before that, let me tell you a joke!"

".....Eh?"

What is this girl saying? Taichi thought.

"Nyaaa~ we were alone before...To be accurate, when I became [Aoki]...When the atmosphere became stern, I also told a joke to soothe it. So I was thinking whether we should first begin with a joke."

"There is no need, okay?! I wasn't hoping for it! What is with your breaking a stern atmosphere when we two are alone?"

What she said was not only a problem of being serious or not.

"But, in this moment...I just can't think of any jokes!"

"Then you should even let it go, hey!"

"I was just joking~ I want to say *a joke that was my attempt to say a joke but failing*...How's this?"

"What do you mean by 'how's this?!'? Even if you want to say *a joke that was your attempt to say a joke but failing*, I didn't want to listen to a joke at the very start!"

"Maybe Taichi didn't want to listen to jokes, but I hope you understand that *a joke that was my attempt to say a joke but failing* wasn't because I can't think of a joke, but because I deliberately chose this joke that has no jokes!"

"I am~ very clear that your saying *a joke of your attempt to say a joke but failing* wasn't because you can't think of a joke, but because you deliberately chose to joke with no jokes!"

"I may as well say that *the joke that was an attempt to joke but failing* is not merely *a joke that was an attempt to joke but failing*, but that keeps saying 'joke', 'joke' to deliberately correlate it with the joke said before; thus, making it a joke that is a difficult joke to make...Nyaa? My suffix sounded weird..."

"I have already vaguely guessed it from the start!"

"By the way, Taichi is unexpectedly cooperative with the atmosphere around."

"If I'm in front of Nagase, I would, for no reason, become like this..."

Why did we sit together outside an open parking lot discussing such things?

"Now, let's go back to our main topic—"

Then, the jovial smile on Nagase disappeared and what left was only a poker face.

"I...actually have five fathers...Ah, but there were only three that legally registered. Yeah, so this what happened."

Before Taichi was prepared, Nagase already let Taichi pry into her dark side.

Of course, Taichi felt puzzled.

"Eh...So this means that your mother divorced and...remarried?"

"Yeah, something like that, but it wasn't really anything. Although I met people of different types, there was no one that was heinous. No matter what the man was—a man who tried to get on well with me, a man that

hated me, or a man that brought children himself...However the person, I got along with him fairly well.

Taichi certainly did not have any related experience, so he couldn't distinctly tell whether her case was scary or not. Four fathers that originally were complete strangers and siblings that were originally complete strangers...Nagase could treat those multitudinous persons as family members without any problem.

"But it is certain that I would get along with them! It's because I've kept changing **myself** to get along with them."

"Kept changing...**yourself**...?"

Nagase continued while staring at the concrete floor of the parking lot.

"My second father—or my first 'stepfather', was a bit problematic. That was when I was in primary one or two...Put in simple terms, He uses violence. Ah, but it wasn't him that caused my trauma! I may as well say the trauma didn't even exist in my own opinion."

"So what Inaban said about 'Please help her to solve this' maybe somehow different from this", Nagase complemented.

"Though I called it as violence, it was not violence that would take me to the children welfare centre. I may as well say I didn't let him to do it...No, should I rather say 'I let him to not do it'?"

Taichi could only listen attentively.

"I played the role of **myself**, the role accompanies the other's likeliness."

No matter it was her eyes, nose, mouth or ears, they all stayed in a condition that was naturally born and grown. She, who didn't need any change, emerged a smile that carried no fog or haze, and because of its perfect clearness, she seemed even more mystical and dreamy.

"...I tried to be cool, but I, at that time, hadn't thought of anything like 'playing a role'; I just understood what **I** should do and what **I** should become so I won't get scolded...And so I did it. I don't know, however, whether it was fortune or misfortune that I happened to excel in this skill and even to an extent that I understood 'If I do this and become like this, not only will I escape from being scolded, I would also become praised'.... And so I did it. I even followed their likes and dislikes... I coped with everything that could change **me**."

Using a feint attitude to please others was an act everyone should have more or less done, so was what Nagase did an extravagant and abnormal example of this?

"Just when I became like that for a while, they divorced again. I went with my mother, and she immediately let a new father became our 'family member'. The new father wasn't bad. In fact, he was good, so I didn't have to do this...But why? Maybe even though I was a child I have an obligation to play a good role. I, again, played the role of **myself** as he wished."

Nagase smiled as if laughing at herself while she swung her head.

"Then I seemed to can't cease myself but to play different 'I's to suit different people. One after another, one after another...My days flew gradually, and in my third middle year—that was last spring—my fifth father...died of sickness. He was a man of few words, but he was a remarkably excellent person; so he

actually found out that I was just playing a role. Before he died, he told me to 'live more freely'."

Her voice was as clear and transparent as a clean stream, and vibrated as if the speaker was sobbing. Maybe her past father and their times recurred to her.

"My mother also seemed to love him. I'm not sure in which level did the change occurred, but when he died, my mum said to me, sobbing, 'Sorry, My capriciousness before troubled you. From now on, mum will endeavour to give you a life you wished.' After that, although we were a single-parent family, we lived no different from normal people...At the end, my story was filled with drastic changes; though, the ending was still happy! Look, there's no trauma, right?"

Nagase looked at Taichi's eyes with a slant.

The autumn sunlight gradually dived into the west side, dying her soft flying hair in the wind into a golden colour.

"But, after that—the ugliest and the worst days began."

Nagase's face changed into a poker face that was like an exquisite statue.

"To act freely and to do whatever I want...Being told, I tried to change, but I...felt extremely surprised, because, what came to my mind was 'What do I like?' or 'What do I want to do?' or 'Which me is the real me?' such foolish questions. Because I played the expected **I** for almost ten years to live, I seemed to forgot...the real **me**."

Those ten years should be the integral period of forming a personality. In those years, however, a girl continually changed herself to cope with others. At the end, this girl became the present Nagase.

"Then...I became troubled. Even though I want to be free and be myself as I like, I didn't know what to do, I was totally...helpless. So I decided to play a role that adequately coped with the current atmosphere, and continued till now."

So that was why she became like this? Taichi suddenly had this thought.

So that was why Nagase would let the teacher to decide the club for her to join?

Because she did not have an **I** that she could choose from.

And the Nagase who got along with the club members, was in fact a role that was played by Nagase, who thinks that Nagase was not the true her?

Was it because of the multiple hers that she could choose to play that made her show so diverse expressions?

"The only way I could confidently believe 'this is my original personality' was through my ability of 'seeing through the wishes of others', which was what made me become like this. Though ironic, it was the last wall that could prevent the real **me** from being completely lost ...In theory it should be...but now maybe I was confused with 'I can do everything freely' this sort of thing...that recently...even my ability...started to vanish...I had such a feeling."

Towards the fact that she didn't notice that Kiriya had androphobia, Nagase looked scared.

"What should I do...I thought. If I lose my ability, I will really lose what made **I**...And how should I, from now on...get along with everyone...? Where should I play which role...is right...? Lately, the role I tried to play...seemed...to be out of my control..."

Inaba reckoned Nagase was the most unstable and in the most danger.

"Then this me...experienced the exchange of the personality and the [body]...Although I almost lose the existence of the **I** who has a personality, still, I can still live as Iori Nagase. Because, everybody would call me Iori Nagase when they look at my [body]...! No matter what changed inside...only when I have this [body]...But, if because of this personality exchange that even my body would become vague...I will lose the **I** who has a personality...I will lose the **I** who has a [body]...If it stays in this condition...gradually no one could be sure **I am who I am**...even I couldn't...Will I...disappear from the world like that?"

After a while of rampantly getting away with the past, what she noticed at the end was her world has already lost its original shape.

To her fragile world that has already begun collapsing, the huge quake of the 'personality exchange' was too strong.

From originally clinching on the pier to being thrown off, Nagase now was sinking deep into darkness; sinking deep into abysmal darkness. Taichi wanted to help her, even if he would need to jump into her darkness he still wanted; but he could not. Not because he was scared, but because even if he really did something, it could not aid her—what he did would be insignificant.

I must think quickly,

What I could do for Nagase now—

"You'll never disappear in the world."

Taichi firmly asseverated.

"Why", Nagase inquired Taichi with her pure and flawless eyes.

"Because whatever that happens, whatever you become, I'll know Nagase is Nagase."

To Nagase who has drowned, Taichi couldn't even throw down a rope to save her. The only thing he could do was to 'let her see brightness'.

Nagase momentarily blinked her eyes in surprise, and then murmured softly,

"That...is impossible..."

"It's not impossible."

Taichi looked at Nagase's eyes while he spoke.

"Why can...Taichi...be so sure...?"

Nagase seemed afraid and scared; at the same time, she inquired Taichi as if expecting something.

"This is because...Nagase to me—"

At this moment, Inaba's voice flashed through my mind.

—A fool that loves to sacrifice himself.

This phrase heavily pushed down on Taichi.

What was I planning to say just now?

Also, what did I say it for?

Was it only to help Nagase and let her see the hope of brightness? Or was it something more?

Taichi didn't know.

But he was sure that one that doesn't know it has no right to say 'those words'.

So Taichi talked evasively, and said anew.

"Eh...So, so I could do it. Please believe in me, it doesn't really matter."

What he said was absurd and ridiculous. One who has perplexity in one's heart could never save Nagase.

Her crystal clear and pure skin along with her gem-like eyes was too brightening that made Taichi avert his eyes.

"If that's what Taichi said, I'll try to believe it..."

Nagase seemed a bit glad, yet lonely.

Chapter 8 : She was Born With That

"Morning, Taichi."

After the weekend, meeting Nagase again will inevitably be a bit embarrassing.

"...Morning, Nagase."

There was an uncomfortable blank time period.

Nagase, as if trying to raise her spirits, used both of her hands to clinch on her white, elastic, and supple cheeks and slapped at it—'pat', 'pat'.

"'Keeping the same attitude no matter what you hear'. Wasn't this a man-to-man agreement we had?!"

"What is it with your tone?"

Taichi responded with a sharp-tongue response.

"'Keeping the same attitude no matter what you hear'. Wasn't this a man-to-man agreement we had?!"

"Why do you have to say it twice? Also, you're not a man...Did you plan to make me speak with a sharp-tongue response?"

Although Taichi didn't know whether it was the right answer, Nagase laughed with a 'hahaha'.

"But, why would the meeting filled with extreme passion when I add a premise that it should be between men? If it was between women or between a man and a woman, there's no way it could have that passion!"

"How can I know...By the way, you're fine?"

Though what he said was incoherent, Taichi suddenly wanted to ask.

"...Oh, I'm fine!"

Nagase squinted her eyes and used her fingers to make a winning gesture 'V'.

Could I understand that smile as what it is on the surface?

"So, in short, if you have anything that needs my help, tell me."

"Yeah, Thank you. Taichi is so gentle."

Nagase drooped her head and murmured embarrassedly.

But then Nagase seemed to have found out something and suddenly turned serious.

"But...the real person who needs to be asked 'Are you fine?' is not me."

Taichi followed Nagase's melancholic eyes to see Himeko Inaba just entering the classroom with a tired look and standing there.



Even though it was the start of a new week, Inaba's body condition had not improved, but worsened.

Taichi was worrying about Nagase; but at the same, he was worrying about Inaba. After all, Inaba's look deterred day by day. Caring for her was conceivable.

Words aside, Taichi had not done anything. Days past like usual. On Friday, during the world history lesson , **that** occurred.

Though it was 'usual', when his view momentarily changed to dull black, Taichi suddenly wanted extremely to throw up.

"Wuahhh!"

He briskly used one of his hands to cover his mouth and blocked those things from his stomach from pouring out.

He didn't have time to confirm 'who' he became, so he immediately stood up and rushed out of the classroom.

He went to the washroom in a scurry.

He could see a black sock and a dress at his thighs, so he decided to go into the girl's washroom.

Taichi rushed into the nearest toilet and spat out all the accumulated vomit; and at the same time, spat out all the other things that continued to rush out. Because of the gastric juice, his throat hurt as if being burnt, and a discomforting feeling, so strong that one would tear apart his chest, came to him. Even his head was in enormous pain.

He noticed someone rushed into the washroom at his back.

"Inaban! Are you okay?"

Hearing Nagase's voice, Taichi recognized he had become [Inaba].

"Was it really Taichi who became me? Ah~~Are you for real? Can't you withstand it? How little willpower you have."

This time it was [Taichi's] angry voice. 80% she was Inaba. I could not be wrong about this.

"Yeah...I'm Taichi...By the way...How could one withstand this pain by one's willpower?!..."

Taichi [Inaba] rinsed his mouth with tap water while moaning.

Although the teacher caught up with them in a flurry, Inaba [Taichi] said, "She's only a bit uncomfortable; she wasn't feeling very good this morning. I will bring her to the Health Room." The teacher didn't do more confirmation and hurried back to the classroom (maybe because he wanted to go back to his lesson as soon as possible).

"Iori, you should also go back to the classroom. I will handle [this]."

"So I was saying...Inaba you should take care of your body...Didn't this scared the shit out of me?...Taichi, are you really okay?"

Nagase worriedly inquired Taichi [Inaba].

"...Oh, it feels much better after I vomitted...Maybe I could go back to the classroom now."

"Taichi, don't forget you are now using [Inaba's body]."

She said sternly as if teaching him.

"...You're right, sorry. After all, I'm in [someone else's body], I must be more careful..."

Taichi deeply introspected at an obvious thing.

"If it was [someone else's body], right..."

Inaba [Taichi] said as if she wanted to say something more.

"I'm just worried if you two handle it yourselves...And you don't care about your own things...You should really go to the Health Room and have a rest; if you can't stand it, don't push yourself, leave early. Understand? Any reply?"

Nagase told them like she was bidding them a few times; and then she returned to the classroom.

"What's the bidding for? Do we look devoid of confidence?"

To Taichi's [Inaba's] murmur, Inaba [Taichi] replied.

"You're right. So, let's head to the clubroom."

"...It just feels that what you said before contradicts with what you said now..."

Of course, nothing more to say—their destination was the clubroom.

At the moment when they almost reached the clubroom, Taichi and Inaba's personality exchange ended.

"...I'm back."

Taichi muttered lowly.

"Yeah."

Inaba replied.

"What do we do now? Should we go to the Health Room? Though we could not say it's impossible if another exchange occurs..."

Inaba was worried that others that were not in her eye's view would enter to [her body], so she would decide to enter the clubroom and not the Health Room.

"If we go to the clubroom, there might be situations out of our expectations...Never mind, if we only need to sleep, the sofa in the clubroom is enough."

Inaba took the wrist rest as a pillow and lay on the sofa. Though if she straightened herself her thighs will be off the sofa, still, it was very comfortable.

"Ahah, I gave you much trouble, Taichi. You should hurry back to class."

"Oh, you're right...How could I say this! You look so bad—how could I ditch you alone? Although I didn't have that vomiting feeling anymore, my body was still heavy and my head still hurts."

"Seemingly, you said to Iori you're fine! And please stop subtly reply to me and make another sharp-tonged response—it's disgusting."

"Don't call me disgusting! And please get well."

The two slightly fell into silence.

"If I'm like this, I'll give others unnecessary troubles...right? Sorry..."

Inaba still gazed at the ceiling and said in a vanishing voice, which seemed to be crying.

"No, you won't give others unnecessary troubles...but you also feel uneasy, right? According to the timing of the personality exchange, everyone could happen to drop into circumstances like mine today...Or I might as well say health is the basics, it has nothing to do with the personality exchange."

"Mmm...yeah."

Inaba vaguely replied and covered her eyes with her right hand.

It was rare that Taichi would get infuriated.

"Hey, Inaba...you must get well. You are obviously strange lately. Before you also collapsed; today this happened. Although you advocate it's okay and we shouldn't worry, everyone know clearly you know it's not okay—We will really become [Inaba], right? Moreover, Inaba was healthy until now, but your body conditions worsened after the personality exchange started, isn't this worrisome? If there is any reason, tell us; and then could we help you...If there is no relation with the personality exchange and is only some kind of sickness, at least tell us that you're 'sick', okay? If you don't want to tell us, you can leave out the name of the sickness."

I maybe did not have the right to tell her this; but seeing her look and attitude, I just could not leave her alone.

"...Please stop shouting noisily, this will only make my head hurt even more."

She wanted to evade the problem again by a vague response.

"Inaba, I want to help you."

I'm not sure if my passion was sent to Inaba, but she rose and sat upright—even though her body wasn't good, her pose was still elegant—she looked up and gazed at me, saying,

"Why do you want to help me...Please don't tell me it's because 'I want to do it' or 'We are companions'."

"Oh..."

Because he originally planned to say this, but being said by Inaba, he couldn't say it instantaneously and quickly thought of other topics.

"...Because Inaba is always thinking for us and caring for us, right? Although usually you look doing this to us willfully, but in critical moments you would always help us, so this is your return."

How's this? Taichi looked down at Inaba as if saying this.

Nevertheless, his speech was rejected by Inaba's nasal-sound laugh.

"So, if I didn't help you and the others, then will you not help me? ...Also please don't say such embarrassing things, you idiot."

"No, I will still help you...but your way of speaking sounds too despicable."

"It's not despicable."

Inaba said distinctively, not allowing Taichi to mourn.

"...Uh."

Correction: He could only mourn.

"But why would you and the others be so kind? I could never understand...If you can be more 'evil', there might be other changes...No, right, the one who needs to change is me, right?"

Inaba spoke of her emotions as if nothing has happened; her feeling was the most important facet.

Then Taichi thought of something.

Speaking of which, Inaba had multiple times showed the gap in her heart, right?

Until now, Inaba had continuously made warnings, but Taichi...No, not only Tachi, all of the club members excluding Inaba only took her warning as a warning directed to themselves.

Because the speaker was Inaba; Because Inaba was that kind of a person; Because Inaba was so excellent she doesn't need anyone to agonize for her, and because Inaba could always point out the wrong things in Taichi and the others...Did a person that could direct everyone to a better side actually had a seriously stereotyped impression?

Taichi slowly commenced; he was also shivering in his own voice.

"Inaba...are...you okay?"

"...What's okay? If you're talking about my body, all I need is some rest."

"No that...I'm talking about the condition this personality exchange has led us to."

Now maybe I showed a look of almost crying out yet filled with solemnness? Taichi thought.

To Taichi, Inaba suddenly eased her face's expression.

That was an extremely tender, gentle, warm, imperturbable, tranquil, and graceful smile.

Although Inaba does express her emotions on her face, her usual impression was as if masked—basically she only shows changes in her emotions on the surface. That kind of Inaba instead exposed her true facet, which was filled with loopholes and unmasked. Maybe there were a lot of things to notice in her.

And then Inaba said,

"—How can I be okay."

Indeed.

Yes, what Inaba said also contained advice for Taichi and the other people.

But compared to those, perhaps she wants to disclose her fragile side? Does she want to tell us it was because of her smartness that led her to discomfort?

Inaba once said the situation was hopeless.

In other words, does this mean that Inaba feels that the situation was helpless?

But even though Taichi heard her say, he could not come up with any conclusion. Until Inaba became so hurt, Taichi were still confined in the delusion of "Since Inaba is so strong, it doesn't matter".

As what Inaba said, he, the 'fool that loves to sacrifice himself' is too dull. The reason why Inaba would become like this was because of the personality exchange and also not recognizing her companions in the club.

She was cleverer than everyone; but because everyone knew she was clever that no one was able to unleash the fragile side of her.

At this moment, Inaba's expression was dyed with a colour of surprise.

"Wait...What I just said doesn't count...Forget it."

Why did it not count?

"No...that...what I mean by 'How can I be okay' is that it couldn't be not okay in this extreme situation, and not by how I handle the problem."

Looking at Inaba who was finding farfetched excuses, Taichi knew, forcibly, that until now what cruel things he had done to Inaba.

"Because isn't Inaba who suffered the most pain in the personality exchange?"

How could I claim myself as her companion if I were not even able to notice this.

Taichi's knees vibrantly bend and he sat on the floor impotently.

"Looks like...there was an exchange again... Ah~What bad luck! Looks like the situation today was poor...I even exposed my weaknesses to such an 'enemy'."

Inaba bit her nails like feeling irascible.

"In Inaba's opinion, am I... an 'enemy'?"

"No, I didn't mean that, you guys—"

Inaba stopped and her eyes went back and forth, indicating clearly her hesitation.

Although Inaba would say everything she wanted to, she could not expose her feelings nakedly.

"—To me, you guys are the most important 'companions' in the world, hence, the biggest 'enemies'."

Maybe this was the first time Inaba exposed 'something' she would never let people see. The door of Inaba's heart gradually opened. The meaning of 'enemy' in her sentence was—

"What does that—"

"This topic ends here."

After Inaba distinctively said this, she closed the opening door of her heart in one gulp.

"You've said till here...You shouldn't run away with this, Inaba. Well, since you've already said we are companions and you are willing to tell me, at least let me share some of your pain. I don't want to see the painful look on a companion!"

"Then close your eyes."

"This isn't the problem."

Does Inaba plan to withstand the pain by herself in the future?

Taichi could not condone her to do so. Taichi had already known the truth.

Closing your eyes, running away from the problem or trying to get away with it—what could this do?

Because the problem has already existed, so we must accept and confront it with our mind; hence, we can advance forward.

This should be what we should do.

Taichi put his hand on his knees and stood up.

"People who can't even tell or know the reasons of the pains of each other should not be called as 'companions'."

Inaba's face twitched like about to cry.

"But if I say it out... then everything will end, so—"

"Although I don't know what lies beneath it, I'm sure everything won't end because of it; please stop despising people, Inaba."

Until now, Taichi could actually feel that Inaba was indeed a girl of his age.

She was strong, but at the same time had her weak side.

"Your words can't be any certification...You guys and I...are different, are completely different...! Furthermore that is...helpless."

Inaba quivered agitatedly and gripped the leather on the sofa so intense it was like being torn apart. If she were to use a little bit more force, it felt that her white and tender fingers would break.

Is it really okay?

Taichi questioned himself.

Maybe it is...Nevertheless, we must march forward. If we do not know what was the reason, we could not adapt any measures. Even if he was hurt at the end, Taichi still wanted to first stand at the starting point.

So he had a face with utterly no fear. He said,

"Inaba, there will be absolutely no problem. Let me save you."

Should one be considered as an ignorant dummy for saying things one couldn't do? But after his confession, Taichi knew he was slightly closer to reality.

Inaba looked at Taichi, potently clenched her fists, and slammed it on the wall, as if trying to destroy her body.

"Why can you say there are no problem to vague things that you still don't know? I can not understand indeed...Okay, so let me tell you."

Inaba's eyes were strong and sharp—to the point even one could feel the hate inside.

There will be no problem. Taichi convinced himself.

"I...I...have no way to trust in you guys."

She spoke something unexpected.

"The personality exchange between people...in other words, this means that 'one's body' and their [role in the society] would be possessed by another one, do you know what this imply?"

Inaba's aggressive voice backed Taichi off.

"During the personality exchange, no matter it is crime or anything, the sole responsibility will be on 'the owner of the body'. One could do anything and shirk all the responsibilities on another one; one could kill a person; one could steal; one could rape; and all the consequences won't be on themselves."

"But...if one were to do this, one would give troubles to the owner of the body."

"Who gives a shit of what happens to someone else."

Inaba coldly interrupted Taichi.

"...Maybe the crime examples I just said was a bit off; but if we exchange in our houses, we could still freely search in the house and get a hold of their secrets or steal away money, right?"

"Right...maybe this could happen..."

"I can't help but to imagine what you guys would be doing. When [my body] was possessed, would it be played? When I think of this, I get scared I can't sleep at night."

Her under-eye bags looked even more deep and acute.

"And the most important thing is, I, from my heart—hate myself for imagining this things. I feel that it would be better if I were to die...I know you guys are my companions so you won't do such things to me, but...really. Maybe this may sound awkward, but I hope you understand this...But, knowing and thinking are two different things. Even though I think I can understand, I can't stop myself from thinking of the scary 'in case'. So

whenever I return to my body after an exchange, I would confirm whether anything happened to me. I'm scared...to let you see the ugly side of myself."

Inaba's soliloquy continued as if overflowing.

"Or I may say I've thought humans would more or less have that kind of a side. Even though their facades tell others 'I believe in you guys', but there would be some level of incredulous in their hearts, right? But, after the personality exchange I knew that you guys do really believe everyone including me. To my views you guys don't feel a bit scared...Then what am I?"

It wasn't 'not' believing, but 'could not' believe; She wanted to 'be trusted', and to 'trust others', yet she 'couldn't trust others'. Of course, Taichi could only imagine what she was thinking. It must be much more painful for her.

"But, Inaba...despite it, we still won't hate you."

That was right. Even though she would think like that, but it could not change the fact that she was Inaba—

"Even though you won't suddenly hate, you won't get along with me like before, right?"

"About this—"

"At least I can't. I'm not freaky enough to tell those who trust in me 'I can't trust you guys' and act as if nothing have happened."

However the way Taichi and the others thought, if Inaba say that was what she reckons, then there was no way of saving her.

Inaba slowly breathed deeply; and then put her hand on her chest, as if her words need much preparation.

"I don't trust anyone in this world, not even my family members. So everyone is my 'enemy'. And you guys are the biggest 'enemy' in them all, maybe because...if it wasn't my capriciousness, you guys will trust me more than anyone will do in this world...If I completely don't trust people, then maybe this will be better; but even though I don't trust people, I don't hate them. I think that if I can act like a normal person and get along with each other joyously, then everything would be fine...But it's because of my personality of being on the fence that made me suffer each and every day."

"Ah~Ah", I finally said it—Inaba supplemented and laughed at herself.

"So—"

From just then Taichi was speechless. Just when he couldn't speak, Inaba deliberately raised the corner of her mouth. That was a smile that would miraculously make one sad.

"On top of that, however you find, you wouldn't find any ways to save me...Because I, from the very start, was that kind of a person."

Plugging in at a strange direction, Inaba continued to speak recklessly.

"I don't have any traumas like Yui or Iori...Frequently, characters in stories will become pessimistic after terrible experiences in their life, right? Looking at them, one would sympathize for them. But to me, I think they are still blessed because they actually have a reason to become like that, right? If it was of that they could still be saved, because we only have to come up of ways to solve their traumas—it's only that simple. But, how can we help people with no traumas? The reason is 'I'm born with that'. If this was the case, then one is helpless. After all, their problems came with them since

birth. If you want to correct it, the only way is to let one to become not oneself anymore...Don't you think this is more dismal than anything else?"

"I don't think I'm any female protagonist in a tragic story"—Inaba said and waved her hand in front of her face.

"What I'm going to say although contains a lot of my personal opinions, I think in reality, most people don't have explicit and dramatic traumas that could be written into stories. Of course, I wouldn't say there were no external influences that made me to become like this, but most people don't have much terrific chances, it's just the way they're born. If it was a story, the writer will prepare 'the way for one to tackle the obstacle' to let reasons become explicit and blend into the story; but in fact, I think most cases in the real world hadn't any ways to solve, and were 'stories that couldn't be stories'. There are not many salvations in this world...In this sense, maybe the personality of your loving to sacrifice yourself is also helpless. Aren't you like that when you're born?"

According to Inaba's theory, things will in fact become what she said. Things like rescues or salvations must be rare cases.

Besides, Taichi was also—

"You're right...There might be no such thing as salvation for those without traumas."

Taichi did not think what Inaba said was wrong, but—this didn't mean he thought it was right.

No, it should be said that he didn't want to think it was right, because if it was, the world would become too vacuum.



Nevertheless, Taichi suddenly thought of something.

If I say this maybe Inaba would get angry? Even though he thought of this, Taichi still decided to continue because he knew however things would end out or whatever things would become one must march forward.

After all, Taichi let Inaba honestly spoke all the things she tried to hide with all her might—even after collapsing. So, he must shoulder this responsibility.

"But, that is because 'there is no need to get saved', right?"

Am I really too optimistic?

"Ah?"

Inaba thinned her eyes and looked at Taichi in surprise.

"So I was saying, I think if humans had that kind of personality from the very start it wouldn't cause a big problem, right?"

Right, because this was a personality that God decided to give humans from their birth.

Inaba momentarily couldn't understand what he implied, but as Taichi expected, what he said seemed to immediately infuriate her.

Anger—her whole body was covered with anger momentarily.

"Oh...In other words, you are saying these trivial things are not worth agonizing, right? Also, people who collapse because of this are mere idiots, right?"

Taichi felt miasma so strong he had ever experienced in his life.

"I-I didn't really say that so badly, right?"

He wanted to give in instantaneously.

But he must confront it.

This world was not so naive that one could gain without getting hurt.

"...But, maybe at the end, this is what it is."

"Taichi!"

Inaba stood up, advanced a step forward in one gulp, and caught the collar of Taichi.

Surrounded by erotic and long eyelashes, her small and long eyes were burning. Though her lips were wan, her cheeks were all red. Her look with no veiling of her strong emotions accompanied by her inborn beauty, produced an unbelievable forcibleness even in her bad body conditions.

Until now, Taichi had thought unilaterally that Inaba's inner side was as strong as her facade, but now it was different; he knew even if she was Inaba, she still had her fragile side.

His neck was clinched so hard that his breathing was difficult, but Taichi did not mind it and kept speaking.

"Or I may as well say...What's wrong with... an Inaba like that?"

Inaba looked struck.

"No... It is depressing that you're not willing to trust us, but I think you don't need to change yourself because of this...I think everyone would accept that kind of you...even if our way of communication will be altered."

Taichi's neck was pulled even harder.

"That kind of a person...If it's me, then I can't accept it...!"

Inaba showed a painful look as if being forced into desperation.

So Taichi told her undoubtedly.

"I accepted."

Her hands loosened up.

"What...are you talking about..."

"So I was saying, didn't I already accept you? Also...Nagase, Kiriya and Aoki will be fine with it. Everyone will accept you; just try, will you? Then your agonies will relieve. Besides, if you change your attitude determinedly, you could also adopt self-defense measures, couldn't you? After that everything can be solved."

"Are-Are you an idiot? How could things flow that easily!"

Inaba screamed surprised in strong awe rather than anger.

"But maybe it would flow easily."

"You...But to do things with such high risk...How can I manage to do it?! If everyone doesn't accept me, then what should I do?"

To tell the truth, the right answer should be "you will have to stick with it".

But, Inaba was now straightforwardly asking for opinion and help despite her usual flaunting; Taichi believes he must think of a way to help her. But he could not successfully find an answer that feels "this is it!" to him.

"Even if so, you still have me; isn't this alright?"

"What...!"

Inaba was speechless; at the same time, she backed two steps.

"Do you...really say these things unconsciously?...Is this inborn...?!"

Inaba widened her eyes as if seeing a freak.

But Taichi thought, "You shouldn't be so shocked, right...?"

"In short, you must first accept yourself; no one can help you with this."

No matter what one plans to change oneself to, the starting point is "to accept oneself".

"...I can't believe I'm taught by Taichi."

Inaba backed a few steps again, and when her thighs collided with the sofa she sat down like collapsing. Going with the flow of her body, she lay down horizontally on the sofa and hid her face into her arms.

This was the first time Taichi saw Inaba who clearly has no protection.

Taichi thought, "let her rest a bit now", and he sat on a chair.

He felt that Inaba and him would directly skip the fourth lesson.

There were a few hundred students having lessons at school. And in this room there were only two people so it was extremely relaxing. Although Taichi didn't know the reason and he could not express it clearly in his words, he thought, "If Inaba shared the same thought as me then it'll be nice."

At this moment, Inaba suddenly jumped up from her curling pose.

"Certainly...this wouldn't work!"

"Why?"

"As I said...I couldn't expose my ugly side to others. No matter what I do I can only see the negative results."

Inaba covered her face and drooped her head. Her usual arrogance and confidence disappeared.

"But it's fine with me—"

"To take Taichi's example as everyone is too grudging."

...I feel I am indirectly said as a 'freak'.

So, what should I do—At this moment, Taichi came up with another idea.

"...Hey, Inaba, I think that if one was to think 'if this was to be known then I'm a goner', sometimes one would take that too seriously."

"Your words of comfort—"

"So I'm deciding to tell you a secret I originally planned to go with me into my grave."

"Eh?"

Inaba showed an in-awe expression for the nth time already today.

"This secret, if known, will disrupt my high school life; I would be sentenced to death in the society or lose my identity as a human—it's a super dangerous secret that is crazy enough to let me frightened to this stage...I have this feeling."

I said this out obviously, but I could not stop my voice from trembling.

Was it really okay to choose this road? If I fail, it might become a tragedy rather than a comedy. Thought it was too late, Taichi started to feel a bit insecure.

"...By the way, what good is to me if you unveil your secret...Do you plan to say 'I've also said my secret, so you should say yours'...?"

"I completely had that plan."

Inaba stood up while jerking her expressions, walked straight to Taichi.

"Ouch!"

She pushed the long table ferociously!

"Wuah!"

The long table hit Taichi's abdomen! What are you doing.

"What is your brain~made of~!"

That was a howl that would freeze people in an instant.

"...Your voice is too loud, Inaba. Though there is some distance from the recreational building from the school apartment, after all, the students are still in their lessons..."

Inaba knocked the table *bam* with her fist.

"Ayahh~ How do I put it, there are many things that started to infuriate me, so I accumulated much stress, what just happened has led me to my extreme."

Her sadistic eyes brightened up fiercely.

"So, please tell me your secret first...!"

A sourly smile floated on Inaba; this was the real her...Wouldn't it be better if she did not return to her original self? Taichi wanted greatly to believe his senses were a misperception.

"Now...you must promise me you will also be honest to the other club members—"

"You tell me first; and I will judge from that. At least I've already told you some kind of my secret."

Taichi nervously swallowed hard. To be frank, to unveil this secret was too scary.

Because it was a taboo subject that should never be discussed with girls.

Taichi wanted to escape...Though, he convinced himself to take out his first step.

Let me first solve the problem at hand. I do not care what will happen later.

"So...I'm going to tell you now..."

This was the strongest nervousness I had ever experienced in my life. My whole body felt numb. I felt that all the things in my stomach are going to pour out.

Taichi didn't know if Inaba was shocked at Taichi's unusual look, but he saw a taut face on Inaba that was ready to confront a battle.

Taichi prepared himself.

"I've...masturbated to you before."

Time stopped.

The air in the room froze as if the temperature of the room was in absolute zero degrees.

Taichi's body couldn't move an inch; because if he were to move, the numb air would melt and spread away. He wanted Inaba to react a bit later.

But time surely could not stop.

"...What you said about masturbating to me...Are you referring to that kind of **masturbation**?"

Inaba asked.

".....Yeah, it's that **masturbation**."

"Oh really? I see...so you took me as your...so this means that Iori and Yui were also took as...?"

...Although his intestines hurt like tearing apart, Taichi could not help but to nod to admit.

"Is that so? So Taichi treats girls of the same grade like this, and exploits them..."

With a still tone and an organized mind, Inaba was scarier than any living thing that ever existed.

"...You took me as...Bah! Gegege, gahahahahaha!"

Inaba held her stomach and burst into laughter. She laughed so hard it disordered her breathing, while she sat inversely on the sofa and slapped *pang, pang*.

"No, I might as well say, Taichi is like that...If you are a boy in puberty, this is natural. By the way, you're bold to say such things...If you don't do it good, you'll be suppressed...It's only me that you're fine with. Please don't tell this to other girls, you idiot."

"So I was saying...the secret that I was hiding is in extreme danger! And I could only tell these things to you."

"Only to me, uh?...Should I be happy about that?...By the way, you're stupid in so many ways! To blurt that secret out was stupid; to think letting others hear it and feel that it'll be okay was stupid; to actually hear it but think it'll be okay was also stupid...and the most stupid thing was to be touched by it..."

Inaba looked upwards, wiped her tears, as if saying "I must not cry". Despite this, She seemed to be a bit late, so she could only incessantly rub her eyes with the collar of her shirt.

"Th-this was that! It's just the tears that was in my eyes when I laughed!"

Taichi thought, "Are you a kid?" But then he thought, she is, in fact, a child...Inaba is still only a child.

So there will be many places we will get agonize or suffer in pain; we could not always walk by ourselves; sometimes, we need someone to help us out. Nevertheless, even if we become adults, this maybe will not change.

"Or I may as well say, you as a girl should bring a handkerchief."

Taichi walked to Inaba's side and handed her a handkerchief.

"...What are you doing...only capable of doing such dumb things...Are you planning to—let me fall for you too?..."

They wanted to do it as quick as possible so they quickly decided to call the Literature Club members.

They decided to do it in the Literature Club clubroom during the noon recess.

Until the noon recess, Inaba, whose face was as red as a cooked octopus, said to Taichi, "Forget that I cried and all other nonsense that I said! If you want to live then do it~~!" She forcibly told Taichi to forget her embarrassing things.

After that, when the bell rang at the end of the fourth lesson, which marks the arrival of the noon recess—

"—This was what happened."

Inaba told her long-hidden secrets and agonies to Nagase, Kiriya and Aoki. Although she escaped much before, she was Inaba indeed. When she was determined, she would do everything straightly.

But words aside, Inaba did not really tossed away all her discomfort and fear—her legs slightly quivered when she spoke.

I think it is fine; I said it would be fine; even though Inaba were that kind of a person those three will still accept you—Taichi deeply believed, and pried at their responses as if praying. If everything does not go as expected and ends up with the worst result, how am I going to apologise to Inaba? No, before that, what will the Literature Club become?

But, if it were these members, I am sure—

The three kept silent (because Inaba told them to). The first to commence was Iori.

"Inaban, in other words, you mean—"

She stopped.

Inaba nervously shook her body.

Hearing my confession, what words will Iori weave?

"—You like to worry, right?"

That was...far from my imagination.

"L-like to worry...Iori, have you heard me say...this isn't a problem that can be solved with this phrase..."

Inaba murmured in astonishment.

Then it was Kiriya who spoke.

"I can understand~ I'm the same. If I exchanged with Aoki, after I return to my body, the first thing I will do is to check every corner of my [body] and see if any of my personal belongings are gone."

"I'm hurt! What you just said really hurt me! Why must it be me! What about Taichi?"

Kiriya replied, "Be quiet! I'm judging by the usual conduct." and crushed Aoki in a loud voice.

"Don't...you guys have other comments?..."

"Mmm...Inaba's thoughts were quite sudden—like crime and whatnot. But you don't worry, I have conscience and ethnic values, so I won't do those bad things. I'm the kind of person that won't even cross the red light!"

Kiriyama puffed out her chest with pride, while making a pose that was suitable for the sound effect *hehe*.

Although there were discrepancies between them, after the talk they knew Kiriyama had a similar problem. Also she didn't deny Inaba's way of thinking and naturally accepted her.

"Or I may say it's everyone that Inaba couldn't believe in, not just me!"

Inaba said as if being forced into desperation.

"Should we take this so seriously...?"

"This is the most important; others don't matter!"

Aoki was even determined that others did not really matter.

The above was the reactions of the Literature Club.

"So, what I have to say to Inaba is—the most important thing is—"

Iori used an abnormally formal tone, and getting everyone's attention, she said,

"—rushing back to the classroom to grab your lunch box."

Inaba took a red-and-white checkered lunch box bag at her face and waved it around; then she showed the most serious expression today.

"Yes, that's right."

"Yeah."

Kiriyama and Aoki also nodded their assent.

"Okay, it's decided then. Now go get it! Taichi, you too; because I'm getting hungry!"

Nagase pushed Inaba and Taichi outside the clubroom at their backs. During this turbulence, Nagase whispered to Inaba some things Taichi couldn't hear.

Maybe it was because of her brain's ordering period didn't catch up with the situation, Inaba had a lost look while she faltered towards the classroom; then she commenced during their walk.

"Compared to lunch, was my agonies which almost pulverized me less important? Wasn't this too flippant?!"

What she said was right.

But, according to the difference of how one looks at things, maybe her agony was not a matter. After all, something like 'the innate character of a person' merely deserves that kind of attention.

"Ah, I'm feeling stupid...the problems that I've agonized to now and the embarrassing things I thought they were, what now..."

If that was what Inaba thought, 'these agonies' will from now on become trivial matters.

This will be fine...Taichi thought.

"...Forget it; after all, I've got hold of the secret that can manipulate your highschool life."

...Even though Inaba can forget it, Taichi could not.

"Hey...Inaba, if you can, I hope you can burnt it into a deep corner in your memory...No, it will be better if you can wipe it out completely from your memory—"

"No."

...Looks like my remaining days of highschool life can only pass successfully by obeying to Inaba.

Ah...Taichi sighed as if he would fall down any time. Inaba exploded in laughter while slapped his back.

After that, she stopped and put her hand lightly on Taichi's shoulder.

"I won't forget it, but relatively, let me also tell you a secret; then we'll be equal."

Inaba shortened her distance with Taichi and leaned her face close to Taichi's ears.

A sweet aroma like honey exuded from her body.

"I've also—masturbated to you before."

She said while spitting out a soft and lukewarm breath.

"What the...you..."

Because of shame, anxiety and fear, Taichi entered into a panicking mode.

In other words, this represents...that thing...will become this...will become like...this is what happened —as if gaining joy from Taichi's waver, Inaba kept crackling.

Chapter 9 : A Confession and the Arrival of Death

"By the way, what is the situation you and Iori have ended up with?!"

Just arriving school the next morning, Inaba had completely recovered over the weekends and seemed to be even healthier and livelier—to a point that gave Taichi a headache.

"N-Nothing, really."

Even after Inaba's confession, there were not much changes in the Literature Club.

Also, recently, everyone has developed immunity to the personality exchange. Even if the exchange occurs, there were not any big hurdles. Although they were nervous during the exchange and bombs might explode at any minute, they still had some kind of 'imperturbability'.

Was that what «Balloon Vine» expected? If that was, then this means that this condition will continue on for a period of time. But if it was not, then what will happen?

Iori was the only person that Taichi worried.

"After she and you took me back home, you guys talked about a lot of things, right? So I was thinking there might some changes after a while, and I waited...At the end, nothing happened! Crap. Does only your sexual desires pass the test?"

"Inaba don't say something like 'sexual desires' in such a fine morning, okay? And I feel that once you talk about these subjects you would carelessly expose 'that secret'. So in some sense, please don't say it!"

Though she would not just stop now.

"You should understand that Nagase is in extreme danger."

"Mmm...I understand...Or I may say why did you know this?"

"Because there are secrets between Iori and me that I did not tell you. When the time comes, maybe I will tell you. But that doesn't matter now. Tsk, I actually didn't want to do this, but there is no other choice now...I can only use the brutal therapy!"

A brutal therapy that would make Inaba reluctant to do—how surprising would that be...Taichi didn't even want to imagine it.



During noon recess at a vacant land somewhere in school—because of its inconspicuous geographical position, it allegedly became the place for confessions. Now, there were a number of silhouettes lurking behind the East Building.

First, in order were Taichi, Inaba, and Nagase hid under bushes of a tree. In front of them were Kiriya Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi who were planning for a rendezvous.

"Inaba...Where did you heard of this news...?"

Taichi, who lowered his body, inquired Inaba who was at his side with the same posture.

"I knew it by chance when I exchanged with Yui lately...Ah, words aside, I didn't intentionally spy into her phone! It's because when I exchanged Aoki sent her a message. I couldn't help but to take a look."

"Still you shouldn't use this at these times...like you should pretend you didn't see it when you had seen it—"

"Every piece of info that I know is a treasure of mine! Of course, I couldn't do that in general areas of common sense, and I wouldn't do it; but what does this have to do with general...I assume."

"If this have nothing to do with the general then what does? Also, what did you assume?"

"Quiet. They have started to speak!"

Nagase stopped them from debating.

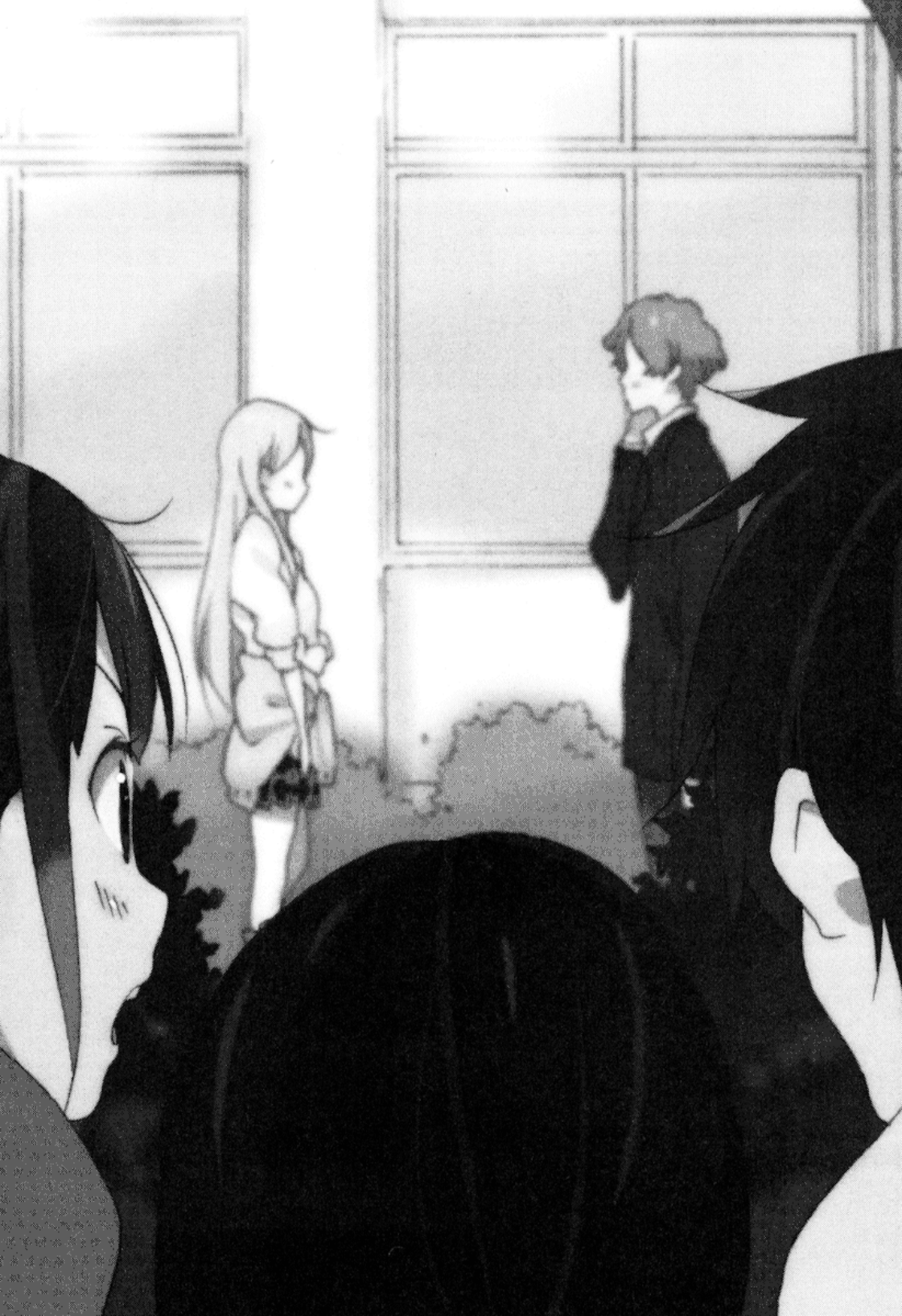
She and Taichi was almost dragged her by Inaba; but when they arrived, Nagase were in high spirits and passionately observed what happened.

"What's the matter...and calling me to such a place. We're in the same class and the same club. We have time to chat at whatever time, haven't we? I want to have my lunch."

Kiriyama was dissatisfied, but her voice was a bit nervous. Though there was a distance between Taichi and them, because of the quietness of the surroundings, listening to what they were saying was easy.

"I have something serious to tell you."

Aoki's tone was very serious and different from usual.



"W-what's the matter...?"

Not knowing what to do, Kiriya fidgeted and spoke as if she would escape at any time.

Aoki seemed to notice her atmosphere and spoke determinedly and distinctively,

"Maybe you would think it's a bit late, but I still need to say this again—I like Kiriya Yui-san; if you are willing, please go out with me."

This confession could be said perfect and direct.

"Ohoh...Although Aoki usually says that he 'likes' her, but to say such things so distinctively, this requires a certain amount of bravery...! Splendid...!"

Even Inaba couldn't help but became amazed. At her side, Taichi and Nagase were speechless.

It was so nervous just to watch at aside...Kiriya, who is involved in the confession must have experienced an impulse much greater than they could ever imagine.

"Wuwu, slower...What are you saying...Awawa—"

Hearing sounds that couldn't make up words, Kiriya's face instantaneously turned all red.

"Wu~ ~ ~ ~ what the heck! What is wrong with you!"

"What are you saying? I said I like you so I confessed..."

"But you always say you like me, so this shouldn't be called a confession, right? Besides, when you did similar things before I remember I rejected you!"

"But my heart hadn't changed at all. Also, I think you hadn't changed yours—"

"No! No way...now...is not the time..."

Kiryama's voice slowly diminished and she drooped her head in depression.

"I know this, but at least we could cultivate our relationship bit by bit, couldn't we?"

Aoki do not know what is stupid or smart; what is a whacko or genius. He did not think of anything or maybe he had already seen through the essence of things.

"F-Firstly, I was thinking, why it was me? Compared to me, Iori is a lot cuter; her body was finer; she's gorgeous and optimistic; Also, Inaba was beautiful. She has the body of a model and smart...a lot better than me...short and without breasts; and also stupid...Although Taichi once said to me 'I think you have much potential to be in the loli market'..."

Inaba and Nagase at the side quickly turned their turned to Taichi. They stared at him as if criticising him while poking him with bamboo sticks.

"Hey...This doesn't mean I'm a lolicon. What I said is just a general opinion..."

Both of them still used the same suspicious eyes and stared at Taichi speechlessly. Taichi felt he could not get away with their suspicion for now.

"No, no. you have a lot of pros! Like you're cute, optimistic, chaste, and a bit childish...there's a lot more, but it doesn't matter, because it's my intuition. At the moment when we met, I felt I will like Yui, and I did. I still like you that much."

"Hmm...Ah...Eh?"

Facing Aoki who had entered serious mode, Kiriya was flustered and at her wits' end.

Trying to calm herself down, she breathed deeply two times with all her body.

"Fu...So, why did you say so until now?"

"Yui, you...How do you feel of Taichi?"

"I...Wuhu—"

Inaba fleetly covered Taichi's opening mouth that was about to shriek.

"This is such a surprising development...just like a Shurabu...Eh, excuse me."

"Baha! Y-your power of suppressing people is abnormally strong! I thought I would suffocate!"

Taichi shouted to the extremity in his area of low voice to produce the biggest protest.

"Hush! We'll get discovered!"

From then on, the quietest person was maybe Nagase.

"What do I feel? Why...should I say this...?"

"You shouldn't be dull enough to not know the reason...as you're not Taichi."

"...From just then I felt I'm subtly being hurt...Was this my misperception?"

Taichi muttered in complaint.

Kiriyama tied and loosened the chestnut hairs on her fingers and repeated this action.

After a while of playing with her hair, she seemed to have made her decision and lightly put her hand down.

Then she stood straight on said,

"I like Taichi!"

"Hm...Wume—" "Hm...Muwu—"

Inaba covered both the mouths beside her that was about to shriek.

"—as a friend."

"Eh?"

"What do you mean by 'Eh'? What opinion do you have?"

"So I was saying, she scared the shit out of me...Yui deliberately kept me in suspense."

Inaba capriciously complained even though she was the one who invaded onto someone else's privacy.

"B-By the way, what do you think of me? I'm just asking..."

"As a friend, I hate you."

"Is this for real?"

"...Of course I'm joking! I have a lot of dissatisfactions, but I wouldn't simply hate someone that is willing to say he likes me."

Kiriyama seemed to successfully bring the conversation into her pace and started to become eloquent.

"Or may I say...if I were to choose from like or hate, I would choose like...but in the terms of a friend!" Kiriyama used her whole body to emphasize on the last part. "All I say now...is only these...so I'm sorry at least now I can't go out with you. In fact, I can't go out with anyone at this moment!"

Even though Taichi observed them from a distance, he could still feel the sincerity of Kiriyama.

"Is that so? I understand now...Thank you for giving me a clear response...I surely needed a head-on confirmation! By the way, I'm good to go after knowing that there is still a possibility!"

"Y-Yeah...On top of that, if considering the rank of my male friends, Taichi is a lot higher than you."

"What! Taichi is certainly my biggest rival...Yui, however, you have changed a lot. Before you wouldn't say such things..."

"Because I can't stay on the same place forever; I must march forward...Alright, words over. Let's head back to the classroom for our lunch!"

Kiriyama turned away and walked towards the school building. She walked large steps firmly and securely. Because of her small body her steps wasn't as large as they seem.

"Eh? So your meaning you're inviting me to eat with you?"

"No! My friends are still waiting for me!"

The voices of the two gradually diminished until it was inaudible.

The first person to stand up from the three who hid all along was Inaba.

"...So, it was fortunate that we could spy them thanks to this exchange. Although I knew it would end like this, it's just my speculation after all."

Indeed.

Taichi also stood up.

"How should I put it...what this is..."

Nagase still sat on the floor without moving. She seemed to be pondering over something.

"Let's go, Nagase."

Taichi put his hand forward to Nagase. Nagase blinked in surprise and stared at his hand.

After a while, Nagase lightly smiled; at the same time, Taichi felt as if 'something important' was starting to melt and 'that something' had started to boil.

"I'm fine."

That being said, Nagase stood up by herself and did not draw support from Taichi's hand.



That day after school, Taichi was left in the Literature Club alone.

The class meeting of Aoki and Kiriya's class, class 1C, seem to be extended. On the other hand, Nagase and Inaba were called for as the representative of the Literature Club.

Although he was doing revisions and preparations on the desk, he was a little out of it; and he knew it. Moreover, his conscious—

At this moment, someone opened the door and came in.

She was Nagase and she looked around the clubroom.

"Is only Taichi here?"

"Oh, yes..."

Her look was different than usual.

"Mmm, after all, the class meeting of class 1C haven't ended yet."

Nagase said, and sat on the sofa solemnly with a straight back.

"...Are you Inaba?"

[Nagase's] face twitched and her eyebrows lifted.

"Yeah..."

"So, where did [Inaba's body] go? Had the personality been exchanged with Nagase?"

"Na....Iori exchanged with me when [I] had something to do. But it was something Iori could also handle so there should be no problem."

"Thanks. Even though we are in such a club, being one of the cadre still needs to do a lot of things."

"Maybe not. By the way—"

—By the way—[Nagase] said again. She hesitated for a long time.

"What do you feel of Yui and Aoki during the noon recess?"

"What do I feel...Why do you ask now?"

"Please don't mind it. Also, you can't possibly have no feelings."

"Mmm...right. But...maybe because I have no opportunity like them so it feels as if they are in a separate world. To be honest, I didn't have any special thoughts, but I feel it is quite terrific. Though I don't know whether this was my thoughts to the two of them or thoughts in other areas."

He had a feeling of being shocked, but the feeling was too bright he could not successfully grasp it.

[Nagase] did not have much response to Taichi's answer and only murmured "Oh..."

"Or I may say what's your point in letting us watch that scene?"

Taichi asked.

[Nagase] widened her eyes and had a look that felt like saying she could not believe Taichi did not know.

"Taichi...Do you really not know why I let you see that?"

"Eh—"

Being said, Taichi retrospected his thoughts.

Do I really not know why it was for?

Was it that I know but I pretend I do not?

—If so, then what was it for?

"Arghh...forget it. So, let us get straight to the point—"

—"Let us get straight to the point", [Nagase] repeated and hesitated for a while.

"So...What do you feel about Iori?"

This question poked right at Taichi's chest.

"...Inaba, you're same as before—your words hit the nail right on the head...Also when you use [Nagase's] appearance to speak, my feelings become more entangled."

Taichi did not know what he said was right, but he still tried to use a casual tone.

Because he thought if only he could do that his wounds would get slightly veiled.

"Isn't this the perfect timing?"

[Nagase] showed an intentional smile that was more rigid than usual.

"Where is it perfect...How do I put it; I..."

Why should I reply to such a question? This thought flashed through Taichi's mind suddenly.

But when he noticed it, he had already spoken.

"I think our relationships now are on the right track. I don't wish to destroy our relationships...but...nevertheless—"

At this moment,

The door of the clubroom opened again. [Inaba] came in and said—

"Hi, Iori. About that thing you told me, because the teacher is not around, so let's...what's the problem?"

After that, [Nagase], who self-proclaimed as Inaba and sitting on the sofa, said,

"Inaban, you came back too quick—"

[Nagase] looked at Taichi's face with sudden shock.

What is going on—

Taichi felt confused...

He thought the inner personality of the person sitting on the sofa with [Nagase's appearance] was Inaba, as she had said; and the person now entering with [Inaba's appearance] was Nagase—but it seems that the person at the door with [Inaba's appearance] had not experienced the personality exchange and completely maintaining Inaba's attitude; and she also called the person with [Nagase's appearance] as Nagase; And that person who had the [Nagase's appearance] also used called her as 'Inaban', a name which only Nagase would call to Inaba—

In other words, this means...

"—You've been fooled!"

[Nagase], who was sitting on the sofa, actually had not experienced the personality exchange and was the real Nagase Iori. She ran away beside Inaba but Inaba quickly got hold of her hand.

"What's wrong with you? Iori!"

"Inaban! Let go of me!"

"How can I leave someone who is crying...Hey, ah!"

Nagase shook off Inaba's hand rudely and ran away from the clubroom.

Inaba left the room in a flurry too to catch up, but she came back to the clubroom after dozens of seconds.

"Crap! If she runs seriously, I can't catch up to her...! After all, her physical ability is abnormally good. By the way, Taichi~~! What have you done!"

Inaba fiercely walked towards Taichi and twitched his collar.

"Wu...How do I know...! I'm not sure, but Nagase 'pretended she exchanged with Inaba'...and then she—"

"Pretend to me...what's that?"

"So I was saying, Nagase pretended her personality was Inaba, and she fooled me! After that you came in...and that's what happened."

Taichi also didn't know what is about—No, not right.

Taichi knew the reason.

Didn't he agreed with Nagase that he could absolutely do it?

And hadn't he told her to believe in him?

Didn't he say that 'whatever condition he was in, he could always know that Nagase is Nagase'?

Was Nagase testing him?

No, that should not be right.

Test?

What nonsense was I saying?

When should I stop using my self-centred way of thinking?

"Nagase, she...wanted to try to believe she, didn't she!"

Taichi was indignant of his failure to respond to Nagase's anticipation.

He was scared that his relationship would be spoiled so he did not dare to walk forward but to escape without further thinking. Nagase must be because of not willing to see Taichi like that would she advance in that way.

Inaba loosened her hand which was twitching on Taichi's collar and put it down.

"Seems like you know it clearly yourself."

"Yeah...I'm very clear I'm the worst guy of all."

"Oh...May I punch you?"

"How did you came up...No, please punch—baho!"

Before Taichi finished, Inaba fiercely slapped his right cheek.

"Ouch...Y-You...No, thank you. It can cheer me up."

Do not be afraid and escape. Confront it! March forward! Resist it with all my might!

This time it was my turn to advance—to use my largest sincerity to respond to Nagase who was willing to believe in me.

Will others laugh at someone who had failed before?

But even if one is laughed, it is not much of a matter; because no matter how people scoffed at one, one could still march forward from failure.

"...How stupid are you guys? It's so surprising! I can't stand you guys anymore." Inaba lied on the sofa. "Okay, get outta here. After all, the person she is looking for isn't me."

Inaba did not look at Taichi and waved her hand like driving a dog away.

"...Understood."

My failure hurt Nagase, so I must shoulder this fact and face myself gallantly to express my thoughts clearly. Taichi prepared himself and left the clubroom.

At last, Taichi had a moment where he looked back.

But Inaba had firmly decided not look at the leaving Taichi.

Rushing down the stairs in one gulp of air, Taichi discovered a huge problem.

"Where did...Nagase go...?"

Okay, let me first run to the school building.

At this moment, a person belligerently stood looking at him.

Her Hair bundled behind her; her spectacles flashed with brightness; and her whole body exuded the style of sublimity.

She was the class president of class 1C—Fujishima Maiko.

She quickly moved and blocked Taichi from going forward.

There was not time to mind Fujishima, Taichi thought...

"Yaegashi-kun!"

But she was calling him obviously, so he could not just leave.

"Haha....Haha....What's the matter...Fujishima...? I-I'm now in a hurry..."

"Did you make Nagase-san cry?"

She hit the nail right on his head.

"Ah, yeah..."

Fujishima advanced on step forward to Taichi.

"Although I'm not sure of the reason, but boys who make weak girls cry must first suffer a slap on the face. Have you prepared yourself?"

Fujishima told Taichi some rules like they were general; but Taichi has never heard of them.

"What is...No, I'm willing to suffer for it."

This kind of punishment was obvious, and if Fujishima could get out if I said this...

"Nyaaa? Isn't your left cheek already red and swollen? That side was already hit."

"Y-yeah...this was just—Wuah!"

His left cheek was again slapped.

"Wu~ ~ My left side was already red and swollen. You should have hit the right side, shouldn't you? Moreover, you slapped me so hard I think I'm getting interested to a new level of pain!"

Taichi found out through this that Fujishima Maiko was a super sadist.

"By the way, do couples really consist of a boy and a girl? How do you think, Yaegashi-kun?"

He could not grasp the intention of her question.

"About that, Fujishima, I don't have the time to discuss these things with you..."

Taichi stepped out to his right but Fujishima moved with the same distance to block him.

"Don't you think dropping out those ethics and that a world which you can love those you like more ideal?"

Taichi this time moved to the left by two steps...but Fujishima moved with the same distance and kept a poker face.

"But to think that unilaterally is impossible! To speak the truth, for one to love someone else must one be first loved by that someone—this is important. Please remember this."

Fujishima threw out a key that was clung to a red ornament. Looking from its shape, it was likely the keys for a bicycle.

"You go to school by the tram, right? Let me lend this to you."

"Eh?"

"It looks like you're the person Nagase-san needs, not me; so chase her, quick! She ran to the left after she got out the front door."

Taichi was puzzled to her unexpected suggestion and looked at the keys on his hands.

"Fujishima...Is this okay?"

"There is nothing to care about; because this is crucial to Nagase-san now, so it's obvious, right?"

"Is there anything more important than stopping her sorrowful tears?"

Fujishima complemented and headed to the bicycle parking lot as if smartly saying 'follow me'."

There should be a limit of her smartness.

I almost fell for her.

"Ah...And one more thing, because you seem to have mistook me so let me say this first. I...am fine with boys too."

Fujishima Maiko declared she was fine with both boys and girls.

Taichi rode on the bicycle Fujishima used to go to school and sped through the town. Although he had phoned Nagase a few times along the road, he failed. She seemed to have turned off her phone or her phone had run out of battery.

An hour passed like a blink of an eye.

Taichi never thought finding someone in the town was this hard.

"After all, she walked on foot, so she shouldn't have gotten too far...Her things are still in the clubroom, so she wouldn't have gone back home. Maybe I should first go back to school for now..."

Just when Taichi was thinking and passing through the river that divided the town,

The sad and sorrowful sunset looked like it silhouetted against a person.

That person had a strong sense of existence which was shown under the beautiful sight.

Her small limbs; Her bundled hair which fluttered in the wind.

A person that would appear as the protagonist in a movie—Nagase Iori.

The slight strong wind blew and Nagase faced backwards a bit to escape from the wind; and then as if seeing Taichi at a corner of her view, she widened her eyes in surprise.

"Tai-Taichi—Wa!"

"Look out!"

Nagase lose her balance on the fence—and she balanced herself again at the critical moment.

Taichi broke out in a cold sweat. She would not die, but the water was quite distant from her and there was a concrete wall against the river so it would not be easy to climb up.

"I-I was really scared...By the way, why are you here..."

Nagase jumped down after a semi-turn on the fence and stood in front of Taichi.

There were traces of tears that left on her eyes.

Taichi's chest started to ache.

He parked his bicycle at the side of the road and gallantly bowed to apologise.

"I'm sorry for not noticing you but promising you...I said it so great but I failed so bad..."

"What we call humans...What is what we call 'myself'? Even if our inner personalities changed, if we kept your original status others wouldn't find out. I thought like this but I also found out that if we somewhat try to pretend someone else, we could become someone not ourselves anymore...Ah, I'm not blaming you! You have done nothing wrong! This completely is my fault...It is without doubt that one would believe in me under such situations; because, we believe in others and had established a relationship based on trust...So, I'm really sorry. I wouldn't do that again...really, really...very sorry."

Nagase repented despondently.

"But that was your way of trying to advance forward, wasn't it? So, thank you. And now it's my turn."

Until now, I had not confronted 'that'.

Until now, I had not thought about 'that'.

So 'that' definitely didn't advance forward.

What was I afraid about? What was I confused of? Was it because I met this situation for the first time? Was it really because of this?

But everyone would be like that? — to be afraid of things they do not know; to be at their wits' end because of it.

If it were something bright, the brighter it was, the scarier and harder to handle would it become.

But if we keep timid and do not do anything, we could never get 'that'.

Even we may not success in our advancing forward, it still holds as a truth.

Maybe we would end with a tragedy and lose 'that' which we longed.

Maybe we would get hurt.

But, 'that' we could get with some kind of risk, had infinite possibilities.

Why did not I notice this?

Accept it, confront it, think about it, and advance forward!

"Recently...there have been a lot of things...a lot of things."

Things with Aoki, Kiriya, Inaba, and finally Nagase—Taichi looked back at those things. When he had accepted it, confronted it, and thought about it, he would discover what he had earned had become his force to advance forward.

"Also, I understood and learnt a very lot...After that, I noticed...to speak the truth, I seem to be—"

The gem-like eyes clearly reflected Taichi.

"I seem to be a dull character with no expression!"

"I know."

...Taichi originally thought this was an impactful truth.

"Eh~So...I extremely long to be like you."

"Long? Long to be someone...like me?"

"That's right. I always think that if I can be like you and have a spade of expressions like happy, angry, delighted, sorrowful, and sometimes joyful, sometimes sombre, sometimes serious and sometimes joking...If I were to list out examples I would never end...but I think it would be great if I could be like you."

That was right; Taichi longed to have different spectacular expressions and a jovial life like Nagase.

"T-That is...only because I...played so many characters...that isn't something to long for. I'm a person...who lost the real 'me'...a fault."

The dark side that Nagase showed.

But, to Taichi now, this was the existence for an answer.

Does it really matter? Tacihi questioned himself. Maybe his prediction was right, or maybe it was wrong—there was some kind of risk. If he really fails again, the possibility of repairing to the original relationship would be certainly low.

But, if there were a possibility that he could save Nagase, he would advance forward for it.

"Is it really what you say it is?"

He said.

At first, Nagase widened her jaws in surprise, and showed an expression that she did not understand what Taichi meant; but her expression gradually become stern and icy.

"What does that mean? What do you want to say? Have you misunderstood something?"

Nagase said in a reproachful tone with a poker face that made Taichi backed a little.

Nevertheless, even if this was it—

"You would joke; you would become silly; you would get embarrassed; you would tell blue jokes; you would recklessly do things or make others do them; you will do anything that comes to your heart; you are a person who proposes good ideas and sensitive to small details; you sometimes don't really think but sometimes you think too much; you are sometimes optimistic and sometimes pessimistic; and when you talk about serious matters you would become sorry and intentionally pretend to become foolish; while sometimes you would seriously discuss about stupid topics; you would sometimes show your sombre side and sometimes your bright side; you would occasionally have a cold expression; you would sometimes be childish while sometimes mature; you are sometimes gentle, like to pull pranks and when you look like you don't really care about people you actually are quite considerate—"

"...Eh? What are you saying...?"

"I'm describing the person, 'Nagase Iori'."

Nagase's body tensed as if shocked, and then she locked her lips tightly as if clenching her teeth.

"Look? Who is the real 'me'? ...No, none of them is the real 'me'—"

"Every one of them is you."

"...What...are you saying..."

"All of them...Each and everyone of them...is Nagase Iori—"

Maybe this was actually what it was.

"No, wait...How can there be someone like that? Someone who have that much faces—"

"This is normal, right? Humans originally have a lot of faces. The problem is only on the disparity of the amount. I'm a person who has less and you have more—it's only this simple."

"But...I would become like this to pander to others..."

"Anyone would change their attitudes depending on the atmosphere. You are just a bit exaggerated in this area...isn't it? Didn't you say 'you can't freely change your face recently'?"

"That was...but I surely...must prepare what attitude I will use to face others to get along with them..."

"There wouldn't be a person who can completely get along with others without any preparation and use his or her own self all the time, right?"

"B-But even the things I like will change...upon the atmosphere..."

"This only you like a lot of things, so you can change your order of liking for different things depending the atmosphere, right?"

"B-But I...can't even decide on my own which club to enter..."

"Isn't this the same with those who randomly choose clubs which are more relaxing or those who enter clubs because of their friends?"

"...Or may I say that along the lines what you said was just plainly dialectics?"

"...Or I may say that along the lines what I said was completely dialectics."

"What, you said it yourself?"—Nagase said and guffawed. Tachi also followed her and laughed, so Nagase followed him and laughed and Taichi then followed her and laughed again. Their laughter called upon each other and became a vortex of laughter.

Simply feeling pleasurable; only pleasurable. A pleasure that felt as if all the 'happiness' around the world has converged here.

The two laughed for a certain long period of time. Nagase then said while gasping,

"Ahhaha, ha...I'm tired...Or in fact, I also long to be like you. Wherever the place, whenever the time, whatever happens...to not waver and to hold on the real self no matter who you're facing—Taichi is Taichi. You stayed as Taichi all along; even if I use different 'me's to face you, you still kept the same attitude; so you can make me assured...I really long to have an explicit self, and to assure others.

Ahah—Taichi moaned in his heart; he was very like Nagase—just completely the opposite.

Taichi has slightly less emotions than normal people; Nagase has slightly more and exaggerated emotions than normal people...But after all, it was only slightly so it was not a big problem even if they kept their original form. In fact, Taichi did not really care about that; it was Nagase who met things that made her trauma in which she exaggeratedly mistook her personality as a serious situation...Was this what happened?

If compared to 'things that protagonists will agonize—like complete emotional fault or acute emotional breakdown such big problems', this was an extremely small problem, but people tend to agonize and worry about such small problems. These small problems—as seen to them—was so big it could crush a person. If we put all those small agonies together, the amount must be lot more than huge and insurmountable agonies. There is not some special meaning to this—it only means that the world in which we live in is like that.

In such a world, we, being entangled by small problems, should do something to live—

That something was not to self-sacrifice—at least Taichi could be certain for now. This seemed to be done for Nagase, but it was also done for himself.

So, let us pursue 'that'.

"I like Nagase Iori, so I wish you can you go out with me."

Both of us lack in something the other had. If we could join hands and march forward together, many small agonies could be cleared. So, let us live together.

Nagase's mouth opened in closed in surprise. She looked speechless. Even in the sunset, her reddening face was clear.

Then she continued to blink her eyes; after a while of blinking, she shrunk her body and drooped her head.

And then when she raised her head—

But—

The expression on her face was—

—'nothingness'.

Her originally reddening cheeks had become wan in a sudden.

That was a face like a Noh mask^[6]."

Her eyes were sombre and hazy.

She lost her vitality.

She looked like the [Gotou Ryuusen] he had seen before.

And then 'that guy' commenced.

"Hello...Long time now see...and sorry. Ahah...Looking at your face, I think you most likely will know...I'm «Balloon Vine»."

—Until just then Taichi forgot about something.

It was that the world of Taichi and the others was now under the control of «Balloon Vine».

It was not strange for anything to happen—no matter how surrealistic it was.

«Balloon Vine» can possess [Gotou].

Of course then he could also possess [Nagase].

"Ahah...Let me first apologise to you—sorry...also help me to apologise to Nagase-san later...this is true...from my heart I say...Mmm, maybe I'm only sorry in the intermediate level...Ahah...let me correct it back to from my heart...but this the wrong of you guys? This is because you guys are too interesting..."

«Balloon Vine» who has now [Nagase's appearance] threw his cell phone and wallet towards Taichi; and then she stood on the fence near the river in surprising speed and faced towards the road Taichi was on.

A strong wind blew and his uniform danced with it.

Betung!

Taichi's heart pounced as if it was about to jump out.

Had he ever experienced such acute strange foreboding in his life before?

At that moment, Taichi carelessly saw it.

He saw [Nagase], which glowed and full of glimmer from just now, exuded a sombre and a sense like a black shadow that was exactly the opposite of 'life'.

"Hey...What are you..."

Because his throat suddenly became so dry he could not say a word. Taichi slowly approached «Balloon Vine» so as to prevent stimulating him.

But, «Balloon Vine» seemed not to be aware of Taichi and concluded with not much sincerity.

"—So as I said, I'm sorry—"

[Nagase's body] fell from the narrow and unsteady stance.

After that—

[Nagase] — «Balloon Vine» fell head-down into the distant water surface.

"Hey, is this for real!"

Just when Taichi hurried to the fence, his vision suddenly turned to complete black.

When his vision returned to normal, his buttocks felt hard. What he saw was a familiar clubroom scene.

And in front of him were Inaba and Aoki.



The members of the Literature Club had now gathered in a corner of the second floor of the general hospital in the city. That corner was a lounge with only a long bench and a vending machine. All the members were there—except Nagase.

Nagase was now in the Intensive Care Unit.

Everyone's expression was wan, so was Taichi who thought of this in his abnormally clear and calm mind.

"Rats!...Nagase is almost dying already, but why can't we do anything...!"

Aoki's nasal words seemed to be said in extreme pain while he potently beat his thighs.

"Don't blame it on yourself, Aoki. We can't really do anything."

Inaba convinced him quietly. Her inexplicable voice was coarse yet comforting.

"Sorry...everyone...If I were...to cheer up a bit...when I became [Taichi]...I should have jumped down to save her...but I heard that the saver might also get drowned...so the correct way was to find help or find something that could float...so I..."

Kiriyama started sobbing.

Inaba, at her side, embraced Kiriyama, who seemed so weak she could collapse at any minute, tightly. She let Kiriyama put her face into her chest while she fondled her chestnut hair.

"Yui, you have done nothing wrong—I must applaud you to be so calm even in such a situation! If you didn't do it correctly, maybe it would turn out to be more tragic...you have done well."

The last phrase made Kiriyama even more agitated that she sobbed even harder, as if trying to say that the only thing she wanted is to cry out loud. Inaba on the other hand bore her frantic emotions.

"Indeed...it's me—Ouch!"

Just when Taichi wanted to speak, Inaba kicked his calf fiercely.

Her eyes moist with tears, Taichi looked at Inaba and saw her expression twisting in pain.

Inaba leant her mouth close to Taichi's ear and squeezed her voice,

"Please, don't repent too...please...hold it. I have no way to continue to bear this; even I'm also becoming a bit depressed...so I wish you can at least be a little more strong...please..."

Falling down, getting saved, being sent to the hospital and forced to hear from the nurse that 'the situation is extremely critical'. Why could I grudgingly bear with such overflowing pressure? Taichi knew the reason—because Inaba bore part of the twisted emotions.

Taichi firmly looked into Inaba's eyes and nodded. Everyone has their limits, and Inaba was not an exception.

Inaba also nodded and her tensed expressions loosened up a bit.

Nobody has done anything wrong here. Everyone knows that it was 'that guy' who did this. Despite of this, we still couldn't help but to reproach ourselves because we want to veil and get rid of our helplessness.

There were only the four club members in the lounge. Nagase's mum seemed not at home so she was not contacted. Gotou seemed to be rushing from school.

Tachi lifted his head and gazed at the ceiling. The dim ceiling spread across his vision. One of the two fluorescent lights on top had broken and had only a weak glow.

—Gok, gok.

Footsteps from afar sounded. They became louder in every step—gradually approaching to the lounge.

A weird quietness covered the lounge. Of course, they would not know who was coming just by hearing those footsteps; but everyone thought "maybe 'that guy' has come" and held their breath while waiting.

And then 'that guy' showed up in the lounge.

They could know just by looking at his face. After all, normal humans could not have an expression that seems to have lost all its vitality.

This was the second time they have met «Balloon Vine» in [Gotou Ryuusen's] body.

"Hi, nice to meet you...Ahaha...everyone is having such dangerous eyes...please don't make anything troublesome...I ask for your cooperation deep down in my heart."

As if having no consciousness that he was responsible for it, «Balloon Vine» [Gotou] said with a plain tone.

He even showed an attitude that he was uninterested to the 'appalling situation'; that made the club members even more confused.

Should I be angry? Or should I be afraid? Should I reproach him? Should we let him to explain our situation? Should I panic? Should I antagonize? Should I escape? Should I punch him? Should I feel scared? Should I repine? —What choice should I make?

Every time when I fail to see any emotions on «Balloon Vine», I would start to be lost in what attitude to confront him; this would make my perplexed feelings seem to be even more perplexed.

"What are you here for? What do you want to do?"

When others could not make up their mind on what to do, Inaba had already quietly showed her anger; the feeling of tranquillity she gave was as if an omen of ferocious eruptions.

"...To inquire for the reasons immediately sure helps me, Inaba-san...Ahaha. So did Yaegashi-kun help me to describe what I did? Ahaha...It's rare that I could enter the main topic but then I drift off...again...forget it. Eh...about thirty minutes later—"

"—[Nagase Iori's body] will die."

He looked as if saying something that was not important.

There should be a limit when you joke, Taichi thought.

"...What the hell are you saying! Are you saying that you can control the life and death of a person?"

Of course, Inaba roared.

"No, no, Inaba-san...How can I do such things...I'm only «Balloon Vine» that isn't worth mentioning...At least I know what is true...that is—[Nagase-san's body] will die; does everyone understand?"

"How will...Who do you think will believe in you!"

Kiriyama's voice was about to cry, but she still said gallantly.

Right, we could not trust him.

"Although it depends on whether you believe in me or not... I still hope you can believe in me... I came here specially for it, so if I don't get my pay, I can't really become energetic... Ahah, I don't really have any energy from the start...

nevertheless, to be honest, I have a little energy now... because you are very interesting... Ahah, I just said something harmful again... when there is something more important to say. Eh, so is everyone prepared...? Inaba-san... can you help me remember what I'm going to say? I don't have the energy or the patience to say it again a few times."

After a slight pause, «Balloon Vine» plainly spoke with no intonation.

"Your personalities are now freely moving among [your bodies]... Undoubtedly, every [body] will contain a personality... this means that if a [body] dies, a personality will be destroyed with it. But... this is very important — the personality that dies does not have to die with the same [body]... Mmm... In fact, even if the personality is different from the [body] that contains it, that person can still live successfully... so I have a suggestion — may all of you please choose the personality to die with the [body of Nagase]? I'm also giving you an extra service... which is, from now on, for thirty minutes, I will let you exchange with the person you want to once you tell me... so this is all I have to say..."

What is he saying?

"... By the way, Umm... doesn't that mean you can deliberately control the personality exchange...? So it actually was not... random...?"

Aoki murmured in extreme surprise.

"Ayahayah, able to exchange personalities randomly but unable to appoint who exchanges... do you think that is possible in common sense? Ahah... But until now the 'personality exchange' was random... because if I didn't set it that way, it would be troublesome..."

Inaba vehemently stood up, rushed into «Balloon Vine» [Gotou] who looked sluggish and was saying self-loathing things.

"Stop joking!"

Inaba cried and attacked «Balloon Vine».

"Ahah... such energy..."

The instant «Balloon Vine» murmured, Inaba stopped her attack. She stopped and looked around confused.

"Eh...? A personality exchange... mmm?"

Looking at her surprised look and the way she spoke — Taichi suspected that Nagase had exchanged with Inaba. Was Nagase's soul inside [Inaba's body] that was in front of him?

Nagase [Inaba] walked away from [Gotou] step by step and headed towards Taichi and the other club members.

"Eh, Why is... Taichi here? Right now, we should be... at the bridge."

Being possessed by «Balloon Vine» and then falling into a coma, Nagase's memory was left at the bridge when she met with Taichi.

No matter how you put it, «Balloon Vine» has gone too far — who does he think we are?

A sudden anger rushed to Taichi's chest. He followed his anger, approached «Balloon Vine» [Gotou] and stretched his hand.

"Stop your — eh?"

Taichi's body floated weightlessly in mid-air.

Then his whole body immediately fell upside down. For an instant Taichi saw the sombre and dark eyes of «Balloon Vine». The next instant, his back experienced a strong impulse.

"Wuah!"

When he regained his consciousness, the pain of his back left him; gazing at the ceiling, he was only depressed in his inability to stop the chaos that «Balloon Vine», a resident from an aberrant world, had made.

Insignificant, he was unable to retaliate the powerful enemy.

Neither was he able to protect the one he said he liked.

"Ayah, as I was saying... these aren't the things you should be doing... So... time's up for my talk here. I'll be back later. Please make your decision before I come back."

No one could stop him from leaving.

Everyone could only stare him off.

"Tai-Taichi! Are you all right? Why was Go here?"

Nagase [Inaba] dashed to Taichi side and stretched her hand to lift him up.

Taichi could not look straight at her confused and anxious look.

Taichi did not want to believe what happened, so he tried to murmur, "Please let Nagase exchange with Inaba." Though «Balloon Vine» said the exchange was set manual, things like these should be impossible in common sense... but—

"... Why am I holding hands with Taichi? And where did that asshole «Balloon Vine» go?"

Inaba's personality had returned back to [Inaba's body] whereas Nagase's personality had returned to [Nagase's body] inside the Intensive Care Unit.

We could only accept this then.

Taichi, Inaba, Kiriya and Aoki temporarily confirmed their status now.

"In other words, it's 'letting us to choose who to kill'... right? What was that guy thinking...! What the... heck...!"

Inaba complained with a voice filled with hate.

"But Iori wouldn't die so easily... because the doctor... is working hard... to save her...!"

Kiriya said her wish desperately.

"Yeah... maybe that asshole «Balloon Vine» was speaking nonsense all the way... But, maybe he wasn't. We must confront it since there's a possibility — no matter how cruel it sounds. If it was as he said, things will go beyond our control and there will be no turning back, so we must obey him... though I'm pissed off at this fact."

As Inaba had said — we could not escape even if we really wanted to.

Because there was no way to tell whether what «Balloon Vine» said was true or false.

"... Bullshit~ ~! How can it end like this with me here!"

Inaba fiercely punched on the bench that was only covered by a thin piece of leather.

"Looks like someone is going to die... or sacrifice themselves... right?"

Aoki covered his head and murmured.

Assume what «Balloon Vine» said was true.

Then [Nagase's body] would die. At the same time, there would be a personality among the five — or a soul — that would die.

At least no one wants to die in the five.

So this will become a debate of 'who to sacrifice' as Aoki said.

Death.

This was the ultimate death that was completely unimaginable.

To let someone else bear the pain — I would not let that happen!

So...

"If someone has to sacrifice, let it be me."

—I want to sacrifice.

—So, let me sacrifice.

"Yui... Please punch his head with the intention to kill him." Inaba said.

"Understood, I will do it with all my power." Kiriya replied.

"Eh, it isn't that good for Yui to use all her power..."

While Aoki was in the middle of his sentence — Kiriyaama had come in front of Taichi.

The blood vessels of her eyes expanded; her expression turned scary; her chestnut long hair had become tousled... Kiriyaama shivered like a tiger in anger.

I almost did not see her fist.

When I regained my consciousness, the crackling sounds of bones reverberated in my brain; my head felt as if being sent flying away — so did my body. I vibrantly rolled on the floor, which caused an unbelievable pain in my cheeks.

I put my hand on my left cheek and moaned.

"What stupid words you say... Stop joking!"

Inaba kneeled down and pulled me, who as still moaning, up and violently gripped my collar.

"What is wrong with you?! What is 'let me sacrifice'? Have you ever considered... considered the feelings of those who are left behind because of your sacrifice? You look like you're thinking for others, but you're just thinking of yourself — a true self-centred bastard!"

Inaba roared at me at an extremely close distance as though we were to stick to each other.

Kiriyaama had punched me directly with a punch that contained her true words and feelings from her heart; and so were Inaba's words. They both touched me.

Then something in my heart collapsed.

"... Yeah... Is that wrong?! I... I just don't want to see anyone getting hurt in front of me! When someone gets hurt or feels pain or disgusted I can't stop myself from imagining the pain they're suffering... Then my imagination would expand and become an incurable pain — I can't stand it! I hate it this way... so, it's better if I can bear it myself, because I know the limit of the pain... and I could bear it... You're right, I'm not doing it for anyone... I'm 'sacrificing myself' only for myself!"

The vague message once in my brain was now clearly spoken... I was finally able to say it out!

My left cheek became as hot as if it was burning under flames, but there was something that moistened it warmly.

I was crying.

In my vague vision, Inaba showed a shocked expression, but she quickly changed to an expression filled with benevolence and let go of her hand that was gripping on my collar.

"So you thought this way, Taichi. You are such a strange person. Though strange, you have a crazy way of kindness! Feeling the pains of others as though they were yourself and saying 'it will be easier for you to bear the pain'...You are such a...gentle and awkward fool. But if you could really suffer for other's pain, couldn't you understand that when you're hurt the people around you also get hurt? Even if it's fine for you to get hurt, it will be painful for us...and especially to those that think you're more than just friends to them."

"Though you're quite flippant to say it at these times, to listen to the words from your heart are wonderful"—Inaba said. Then she clumsily wiped off my tears.

"Sorry, Taichi!"

Kiriyama, at my side, fell on the floor crying.

"Sorry, you're in pain. Sorry, you're in pain. Sorry, you're in pain..." She continuously repeated that.

"It doesn't matter...Kiriyama, didn't you want me to wake up? Besides...your hands and your heart also hurts...I should be one to say sorry...Thank you."

"There's only one thing...I hope you could understand...If you...die, then we'll suffer from a pain that would be tens and hundreds of what we suffered just now...! So...So please don't say that!"

"You don't need to say this now as he had understood..." Inaba murmured beside Kiriyama.

Taichi deeply felt the gentleness of everyone; and at the same time he understood how selfish he was before. In theory his actions are plainly helping others, but sometimes his actions aren't.

If there were not the 'personality exchange', maybe I would have never faced this side of myself.

I knew a bit more of myself.

And I knew a lot more of the people around.

By accepting, thinking, and advancing, I could gain a lot of things from now on.

Though there might be a lot of painful things, there will still be an innumerable amount of joyful things—this kind of my life is waiting for me.

—But surely someone must leave from that kind of a future.

That was desperation that could not be described completely by cruelty, dismalness, and desolation.

"So...what should we do...!"

I had no way but to moan.

At this time, Aoki spoke.

"I think the only one to die with [Iori's body] is herself..."

The naturally flowing time seemed to be resisted.

I did not want to think of anything; I was unable to.

"W-What are you saying! Please...Pleasee don't say that Iori should die!"

Kiriyama agitatedly gasped like a wild beast.

"...I...I don't want to say that...! I just think this must be said by someone..."

At last, Aoki added with a weak voice that was almost inaudible, "...We can't just let Inaba play the bad person."

"Tsk, you guys are...too gentle..."

Inaba said with a wavered voice.

This fact was a tacit mutual understanding among them.

If they let Nagase to live, this will mean that Nagase will live on [someone else's body]. There was no way to justify that Nagase should use [someone else's body] and live as [another person].

But even so—

My thinking went into infinite loops.

There was no progress in my thinking.

"It isn't right to make a decision when Nagase's absent...I think we have to let her know...what do you think...?"

"You're right...there's no way...I really suck at only capable saying 'there's no way' and nothing else...!"

"After all, I said it, so let me do the exchange..." Aoki continued, "Please let me—Aoki Yoshifumi, exchange with Nagase Iori."

After only an instant, [Aoki] blinked her eyes in surprise and looked at Taichi, who was on the floor amazed, Inaba and Yui and asked them what happened.

"Eh...even I don't really get what situation we've ended up with."

In short, Inaba explained to Nagase [Aoki] briefly on what happened.

"You'll be shocked however the time we say it...so I decided to make it clear to you now, Iori, you...will maybe die."

Inaba stared straight at Nagase [Aoki] and spoke to her firmly. Actually it would be hard to even speak it out, but was the strength of Inaba to hide her weak side.

Nagase [Aoki] should have understood from Inaba's attitude that she was absolutely not joking around, because the look on her face obviously tensed and her eyes were sacred like a puppy—she hesitated like she was quavering.

Her eyes moved and stopped when directed to mine.

For a moment, though only a bit, Nagase's [Aoki's] expression eased.

Maybe I could give something to Nagase at her deep distress. For this reason, I stared straight back to her.

I feel remorse for being unable to do anything else for her.

She then left her eyes off me and looked at Kiriyaama.

A big teardrop coursed down Kiriyaama's face, but she potently bit her lips in order not to cry out or whimper.

Nagase [Aoki] then turned her eyes back to me, closed her eyes, and locked her lips into a straight line.

After a few seconds of silence, she opened her eyes.

"Fine, please continue."

She said with a respectable, brave and masculine expression.

In my memory, I had never seen any humans with such consciousness.

Then Nagase [Aoki] kept silent during Inaba's explanation. She would sometimes nod in response.

Inaba's explanation ended soon after that.

In spite of this, Nagase [Aoki] still kept silent.

What was she thinking in her heart? I could not imagine.

So, how much time does she need? Everyone might have this thinking. In the next instant, however,

she smiled.

Then she said,

"If that's the case, then let me die."

That was a bright sound that felt no heaviness.

"Ah...Am I really going to die?...Hehe, I know I'm going to die but I still could speak to everyone so casually—this feels miraculous."

"Maybe...not..."

Kiriyama tried to deny it with an extremely weak voice.

"Mmm, maybe you're right...but I would still act as if 'I would'; after all, I don't want to regret."

Because her tone was no different from usual, this stimulated my tear glands.

"Nagase...but maybe you wouldn't..."

"That is not the way to take it, nor is it possible."

Nagase's blunt and direct smile pierced through my heart. Her appearance was undoubtedly [Aoki's], but her smile obviously belonged to Nagase.

"Everything including my appearance is a part of 'me'! My personality or my appearance isn't me—the sum of them is. Besides, I'm proud that I'm 'myself'...I had almost lost myself, but someone reminded me of this."

Nagase looked at everyone's face and held everyone in suspense. Her face looked certain of success and about to play her trump card.

"Besides, to kill one's personality and live in his [body] is a sin too heavy for me to bear."

No one could refute her.

Then Nagase [Aoki] wish everyone could listen to her last wish.

"Can I...have a talk with every one of you independently?"

So the club members followed Nagase's wish and let her talk with each of them in the lounge of the hospital for the last moments of her life.

The last moments of her life.

No one wanted to admit it, and some may even want to oppose it, but as every minute and second pass away, everyone was incapable of doing anything.

«Balloon Vine» said he would be back in thirty minutes so there wasn't much time now.

At the beginning, Nagase was sent to [Kiryama's body] to meet with Aoki who was returned to [Aoki's body]; after that, she continued to use [Kiryama's body] to meet with Inaba. When Aoki passed by Inaba, there were tears on his face.

And now Nagase was using [Inaba's body] to meet with Kiriyama.

I sat with Aoki on the long bench in the corridor that was a bit far from the lounge; but we didn't talk. I looked at the door of the Intensive Care Unit.

[Nagase Iori's body] was in that room and the personality that was inside that body belong to Inaba. Of course, Nagase's body had not conscious so Inaba should now be in vast darkness with no consciousness or feeling.

I could hear sounds of someone sobbing and walking along the corridor.

"Tai-Taichi...Iori is calling you..."

Kiriyama choked with sobs.

I nodded my head without leaving a word. Then I went through the corridor and entered the lounge.

Her medium-long glossy black hair, her slender and small limbs, and a tender and sweet atmosphere that would not be emanated from her usually...

In front of me, there was a living with [Inaba's] appearance but without Inaba's existence.

The kind of atmosphere that allowed the sending of messages without words firmed the existence of Nagase.

"Hi, Taichi."

Nagase [Inaba] greeted me like any other morning.

"Yo, Nagase."

I replied her with the same attitude.

My heart was incredibly calm. Rather than sinking into grief, I decided to, with all my might, feel this instant now.

"Isn't it strange that only Taichi is like usual...? Others had an expression that they were participating in my funeral.

"...Do you want me to have that expression?"

"No, No, Please don't. Please don't! If you do, it will be hard to chat and cause a headache! Also from now on, the time for our last meeting is ticking away...In short, Taichi, thank you, because I didn't have the chance to thank you there at the bridge. After hearing your words, I think my agonies...though I can't say they were completely gone...I feel a lot more comfortable now, and it occurred to me that I can include a lot of things in 'myself' and like that kind of 'me'."

Nagase finally accepted herself—this seems to be a correct statement. To advance further one will maybe pay more time, but starting from 'that' is fine; after all, the starting point is 'accepting oneself'.

Though there was no time for that now.

"Also, you also said...you liked me, and you confessed to me, right? ...I didn't answer you then, so now I will."

Nagase [Inaba] showed a nervous yet a determined and serious expression. I also used a frank expression to await the words that Nagase was going to weave.

"—But before that, you are still anticipating for me to tell a joke, right?!"

"I'm not anticipating, but I've guessed you would tell a joke!"

Even in this circumstances she was still funny...There should be a limit to the adamancy of her playfulness.

"He, he, he"—Nagase [Inaba] smiled with an expression that was all in her plan—but that stopped now.

Nagase's [Inaba's] expression suddenly twitched.

"~ ~What...What's the matter...Why can you keep you casualness to this stage...Others, on the other hand, look very sad..."

Of course I was sad and I want badly to cry, but if I really cry—

"Of course I'm sad. I'm so sad I want to die...But, aren't you more sad than me?"

"—So Nagase could not cry?"

The question I asked finally made Nagase burst into tears; her tears affluently flowed out.

It was certain that she would cry; it would be strange if she did not all this time.

After all, she was about to die.

She must be so sad she wanted to cry in desperation, scream, or moan; but she didn't.

Maybe it was her way of gentleness in not making everyone even sadder, because I would do the same if I were she.

But, that did not matter now.

I walked towards her and hugged her.

It was extremely soft.

Warm.

And sorrow.

Though that [body] belonged to Inaba.

"Ah~...I don't want to die yet...I want to live a bit longer...My life just started now! Why...Why...must I...go through such things...What wrong...have I done? ..."

Nagase desperately cried deep down in her heart this obvious fact. Her tears overflowed out of her control.

I bore her tears.

So, I did not drop a teardrop myself.

Would I be criticised as a "fool that loves to sacrifice himself"?

No, I would not. What I did was not for myself, but to care for her and help her; so I should not be criticised. I was unable to clearly make a differentiation, but I feel that I slightly started to understand something.

"...You also confessed...and said you like me..."

A warm feeling rushed to my chest; I resisted it the moment before it became a teardrop; and at the same time I let my hate to «Balloon Vine» sank to the bottom of my heart. In this most precious and sacred time in my life, I do not want to think of these things.

After a while, Nagase [Inaba] parted from me while wiping her tears.

"After all, it's my last time...I must...say this clearly."

Nagase [Inaba] inhaled and exhaled as if preparing. She smiled with her red and swollen eyes.

I could see a future in that smile.



It was a bright and glimmering future.

Even in this condition,

that smile was enough to be called a miracle.

"I also like Yaegashi Taichi, so please...don't go out with me."

"It's my pleas...what?"

What was going on?

"Fufufu, Aren't I going to die now? You can't go out with such a person, or else you'll get a headache, right?"

"Are you still minding that?"

She blocked my screaming mouth with her left hand.

She was so gentle my breast was about to tear apart.

"On the contrary, please give me a memory...so, let's kiss?"

"If it was only a kiss, Inaban would probably forgive me"—Nagase [Inaba] murmured lowly.

"Eh...I have to ask now...who do you choose?"

Who will die?

«Balloon Vine» [Gotou] inquired tiredly a question so deep it was way beyond normal circumstances. In front of «Balloon Vine» were Nagase [Inaba], Taichi, Kiriama, and Aoki who all sat on the long bench silently.

"It's me...I, Nagase Iori will die with [Nagase Iori's body] altogether."

Without any hesitation, Nagase [Inaba] stood up and said. Her incredible behaviour made Taichi and the others completely speechless and numb.

"Mmm...That is the best conclusion...Ahah...So there wasn't any miraculous change?"

"But can I ask you one more thing before I die?"

Nagase [Inaba] stared straight at the person who caused her death and asked him.

She had an expression only made for that case.

"So, what actually is this...?"

Spending about a month's time letting Taichi and the other 4 people exchanging personalities randomly and making someone die at the end—what actually is this?

"...What is this...long words short...please don't care about this from now and also in the future..."

«Balloon Vine» felt annoyed to Nagase's sincere question and skimped it.

"How can anyone accept that answer—Mm?"

Nagase [Inaba] stopped Kiriya who was trying to stand up and debate.

"Is it? ... Indeed, you do not plan to answer me directly...then forget it, but there's one thing I could never yield nor allow; let me ask you—"

She said with an expression enough to hold one's breath with her beauty and determination.

"—You won't ever do this to anyone else, right?"

The matter that she wanted to confirm no matter what was this.

This indeed was something that must be considered. From now on, will Taichi and the others still experience this ridiculous situation? This question matters to life and death.

But was that something that Nagase needed to care about?

Was that what she could care about?

She was a person about to face death...

Hearing her words, «Balloon Vine» [Gotou] temporarily became static; there was no changes in his expression, but in what Taichi saw he seemed a bit shocked.

"...Of course."

His tone was a bit honest.

"—Ahah, has the time come yet?"

«Balloon Vine» suddenly said.

He did not even give any time for anyone to prepare himself or herself.

[Inaba's body] instantaneously stiffened, and then [Inaba] lightly shook her head.

"What the—"

[Inaba] who was about to speak caught in her vision «Balloon Vine» [Gotou] who was right in front of her.

"You...! No, more importantly, Iori—"

«Balloon Vine» did not show any special response to her words, because Taichi knew he had terminated the 'personality exchange'.

At the same time when Inaba screamed, the door of the Intensive Care Unit opened.

At this moment—

What «Balloon Vine» said was—

Everyone held their breath and gazed at the opening door.

Everyone prayed that it would not happen

Please do not end now.

Please do not let it end.

Please let us dream a little more that Nagase would not die yet.

But the time passed mercilessly.

Not long, the doctor that approached them said—

"Congratulations. She is out of the woods now. It's all right."



The doctor told Taichi and the others, startled, that they were really lucky this time. They did not have to worry about any side effects and she would later be transferred to other medical wards and they could meet then.

The doctor was a bit surprised why they did not have much response, but he seemed to have explained it as "because they overdone their relaxation". So the doctor left a word—"In short, it's too good to be true"—and left them.

When everyone was stunned, Inaba managed to grudgingly speak,

"Hey...you...what is this...?"

"Yes, yes...thanks everyone..."

«Balloon Vine» [Gotou] said as if nothing had happened.

"Ahah...and please accept this cake as your compensation...Ahah...It would be even better if you could also take this to Nagase-san as her gift when you visit her...to me mainly that is."

«Balloon Vine» lightly lifted his head which was holding a paper bag.

Inaba backed to the wall and banged her head 'bong' on the wall.

"I'm tricked...though this is possible...and I've actually suspected it...but...Ah ~ ~ ~ By the way...Ah ~ ~ ~ What is this actually?!"

"Eh...Then...Iori...is fine...She is still...living! Wu-Wuah~ ~"

Kiriyama clenched her teeth and murmured word by word. She then covered her face and started crying.

"...Is that so? I-It's so great...Wuah...I feel impotent..."

Aoki let his body sled down slowly and finally sat on the floor.

As for Taichi...his brain was still malfunctioning because he was wondering what to do with what he did with Nagase...Or he might as well think over

how he should get along with her from now on...Mmm, maybe he should just get along with her as usual.

"In short, I'm sorry...Inaba."

Taichi apologised to Inaba for the time being and prayed that was not Inaba's first kiss.

"...Hey, about this...from where it started and where it ended—is this all part of your plan?"

Inaba asked «Balloon Vine» as if suddenly losing all her power.

"Mmm...If I were to say, everything, from head to toe was part of my plan...what happened was similar to what I've expected...because what I could do are far from what you guys could imagine...After all, we could exchange personalities between people; can you understand if I put it this way? ...Ahah...This has nothing to do with you guys..."

"...So you are saying you originally didn't plan to do anything with Nagase?"

Speaking of which, when «Balloon Vine» possessed [Nagase], he specially took out her cell phone and wallet before jumping into the river—Taichi started to remember as he listened to «Balloon Vine».

"...Of course, how can I trouble a kind citizen like that...though there were enough troubles caused in her daily lives...But I hope to compensate this with a cake...So, I don't plan to say anything like hoping you guys to forgive me, but I do hope that you won't hate me. In fact...you guys...have met some good things, haven't you?"

His last sentence seemed to contain the first feeling «Balloon Vine» has for Taichi and the others, though this was so thin it might be a misperception.

"So...I have to leave now and go back. Ahah...You guys look like you seem to understand, but please don't penalise [this person]...because it would be bad if there are aftermath; on top of that, or should I say, if you could, please don't think too much about my things or just simply forget about me...Or maybe you possibly can't? Ahah...I've said too much after 'so'...So, see you later."

When he finished, [Gotou's] head drooped like how Taichi and the others experienced a 'personality exchange'—then he immediately wakened; he lifted his head and opened his eyes.

The 'drama' arrived like a sudden storm and shocked them with unbelievable power, but the curtain call of it was yet plain and calm.

"...Mmm? This is...? I remember I rushed it with a rental car because I heard Nagase fell into the river and was sent to hospital...strange? This is the hospital. Oh, everyone of the Literature Club except Nagase is already here, it's shocking—so I used all my might to get here that I even lost my consciousness on my way...gosh, I really want to praise myself from my yet unleashed power when I do things for my students...and what's this paper bag doing here on my right hand...? Ohoh...it's strawberry rice balls...! Mmm? But why would it be here...? Forget it, I like strawberries anyway...Right, about Nagase's condition—Ooouch Ouch Ouch Ouch! It hurts! It really hurts, Inaba-san!"

Inaba cobra-twisted Gotou.

"Shut up! I have to let the stupid and strange head of yours to remember firmly 'if you don't think deep, you'll have a dismal ending!'"

Just when she said it, she had changed her cobra twist into a questioning cobra twist (which is to use cobra twist incisively while pressing the opponent's head downwards by a hand) and to a cruel extent of incisiveness.

Epilogue

—Then, after a week.

That guy lied, and even his existence was so vague that at the end we still didn't know who he was, but what he said about no aftermath was true. Nagase did not experience any side effects and came immediately back school. And a mail seemed to be directly thrown in her mailbox at her home. The money for the medical fees was inside the mail—«Balloon Vine» sure took detailed care of remedial measures. (Although Gotou mentioned in a class meeting a few days later, "I obviously remembered that I didn't withdraw money, but when I looked at my bank savings some of my money was gone...What do you think? Does this mean I fell trap in some kind of fraud? Should I call the police?" But the Literature Club decided to completely neglect what he said)

"At least «Balloon Vine» didn't have malicious intent towards us. Or maybe he is not a bad guy"—Taichi though and honestly said. But Inaba scolded him, "Your overly-nice way of thinking things are so embarrassing!"

At the end, they finally escaped from the turbulence when Nagase entered the hospital. And today was the start of a new week of club activities that the Literature Club missed so badly. Activities, however, were not amazing or terrific things.

After school, Taichi was on duty to clean the classroom. After he finished, he packed up his things and headed to the fourth floor of the recreational building. The other members should have already gathered there, right?

Hereafter, there were no 'personality exchanges'.

Though strange, when we try to remember what happened, what was stained in our minds during the personality exchange was very little. I don't understand, it was an abnormal phenomenon after all...Or I might as well say as time passes, though it did occur, it gradually faded away as it had a bit deviated off reality. It seemed everything happened in our dreams.

And to me, the most important thing is, there were more important things that happened.

The world of the Literature Club members changed.

The personality exchange was like a storm to us, exposing our agonies one by one. Nevertheless, some agonies that felt terribly huge to one, when tumbling off to the outside, one might find it to be unexpectedly small and insignificant.

Even every insignificant one could handle such problems.

Of course, one might get hurt, and may not have an absolute chance to win.

But problems that exist in an insignificant one should be smaller and more insignificant, right? This is what I mean.

But to stand up and fight—to confront, accept, and to think about it, certainly is not something that can be done at ease.

It will be too hard to be done by one solely.

It will be too hard if there are no opportunities.

But, even if it will be hard, if we can do it—

The worlds of the insignificant five could change, and change to anything they wished.

Problems might still exist, and matters might not be eradicated from the roots.

For example, Taichi who has a personality to sacrifice himself for others hadn't any changes at all...Of course, this was because this was a personality that existed inside of him, so I guess this would not change.

But, if we confront the problem...

During the phenomenon, the Literature Club members experienced a lot of things among them, and a lot of things had changed. Those things are irreversible.

But should we say it was fortune or misfortune? At least in what Taichi saw, everyone had not changed towards the bad. They managed to do this.

That was because all of them were here and none of them were absent...This is something the five managed to do.

Compared to the past, Inaba looked gentler.

Compared to her past, Kiriyaama looked more active in finding boys to chat with.

Compared to his past, Aoki looked smarter.

As to Nagase...Because she was too embarrassed after the incident, we didn't look at each other in the eyes and chat.

Compared to those, a more important thing was Taichi now extremely anticipating the gatherings with the members in the clubroom. A lot had happened, but only if the five could get together and smile...maybe it was fine from now on. Taichi couldn't help but think like this.

To think like this was already a treasure; and this treasure represented everything.

Today, would Inaba still get angry at trivial things and resort to violence?

Today, would Kiriya still become red, shout, and stagger when she is teased by 'your reaction is the most interesting'?

Today, would Aoki be treated undoubtedly as the idiot and play as this role like a professional?

Today, would Nagase wilfully and incessantly act foolishly whether it was under her plan or not?

So, it was time to seriously undergo our club activities—to make an article that completely shows our interests!

Although Taichi believed it in his heart, at the same time he knew that today wouldn't go too well. Was it because of everyone's frolic? He also actually wished them to be more frolicking.

Go, what lies ahead of me is the door to the clubroom!

My eye view was pretty good.

If I were to say a thing I was still pondering, was Inaba using an unimaginable cruel smile to say, "I heard it from Iori. You...seemed to have stolen my first kiss. What do you think you should compensate for my loss...Fufufufu."

The compensation should not kill me...or so I wished.

(Kokoro Connect Volume 1 Random People The End)

Author's Notes

Hello everyone. My name is Sadanatsu Anda.

It was fortunate that this novel won the Enterbrain's 11th Entertainment Awards Special Prize, and through it I made my debut.

Many thanks to a lot of people that helped me, who is still insignificant, to grudgingly make it to writing the 'Author's Notes'. My heart is now filled with thanks to each and every one.

Because the editor once told me, "You are new, but having thanks in the whole script is boring!" so even though I was an ignorant and dull new person, maybe not even a self-proclaimed writer, I want to talk about the sweetness and bitterness when I started writing the novel.

To accomplish something, one must endure a harsh period.

Of course, I write novels because I love to.

Although this is a love different from "I liked reading from a long time ago so I want to write novels!", I aimed to be a novelist, and now I am fortunate to write something called the 'Author's Notes', so at least I do not hate to write novels.

Though not perfect, I still had the eager and passion to write novels. But if you ask me could I persevere with the same tension all the time, I will tell you it is surely difficult.

To finish writing a novel, those that are smart and brilliant could excel easily. But if it is someone like me, who always encounter problems, feel bored,

think "I can't continue writing~! Writing novels are annoying~!", the motivation to write novels will drop and thus, become agonized.

Nevertheless, one who always complain "I can't continue writing" or "It feels tiresome", a novel would not get done—though this is not limited to writing novels—At these times one must persevere and straddle; or else nothing could be done.

Nevertheless, although I said one must persevere and straddle, I am not one of those people who could successfully manipulate their own emotions—I can't tell myself "Okay, let's do this" to raise my own motivation.

Therefore, I tried various ways to raise my motivation. There were excellent ways that are cheap and effective.

Right, it is what you know—'to delude (to dream?)'.

For example, "The novels I write will be very popular and I can smile off my face when I earn those royalties!" or "This will become a movie!" or "This will even become a social phenomenon!" or "There will even be a prize with my own novel name!". When I delude such things (only pure delusions!), I will feel "Yeah~! I thrived~!" and a gradually had the push-and-go (sorry for my vulgarity).

At the times when I submitted my draft to the new person's award, I was helped much by Mr. Delusion.

From now on I will need more help from him.

Speaking of which, when I submitted my draft, there was only one thing I could do to relieve the tension when my draft was jammed.

Right, it is what you know—thinking of my pen name.

Honestly, I am not so hardheaded when it comes to choosing the pen name, but thinking of what pen name to choose was pleasant and I had come up with different ideas.

After that, though I'm not sure of the reason, when I was about to submit the draft, I thought that "Something that goes like Allan Poe →Edogawa Ranpo kind of pen name would be kinda cool, eh?"

There was not any special reason.

It was only my feeling.

Therefore, I was thinking "Find a person I like or respects; then copy his name to become my pen name!"; then because of this (after all this is to relieve my stress) I considered a few pen names.

Then what happened? I don't know why, but what was on my list was those names of professional wrestlers!

...

Although I know that having a target as a writer, using such names was inappropriate, I thought "I'm not going to immediately become a professional writer anyways, so it doesn't really matter, eh?". So I decided to copy my respected professional wrestler player and came down with this pen name after repeated deliberation.

To be frank, it was an enjoying thing to do.

...But I never thought I would use this pen name...

Ah, actually I didn't have any regret for using this pen name.

Finally...

By the way, I am not a professional wrestler otaku.

If one like me self-proclaims as a 'professional wrestler otaku', one must be too conceited.

I am speaking the truth.

Professional wrestling is such profound.

Ah, you should have no interest in such things, sorry.

So, here comes my word of thanks!

First, are those who are involved in the ENTAME prize in Famitsu Bunko who gave me the opportunity to make my debut. Thank you.

Second, are those who did your best to let this book publish (especially the editor). Thank you.

Third, is Shiromizakana-sensei who drew fantastic illustrations even in her busiest times. Thank you very much.

Lastly, thank you for all of you readers who were willing to pick up and read this book.

If you think this book is good after you read it, I would feel deeply honoured.

January 2010, Sadanatsu Anda.

ありがとうございます
また &
みずき様でした!



INAB

References

1. ↑ Ordinance-designated city is a city in Japan that is governed by its own law, with population over 500 thousand and appointed by the government. The city has rights over social welfare, public hygiene, and urban planning etc. Up to 19 legislative criteria. It could also set up districts.
2. ↑ Sweeping side punch is a technique in karate that uses fingertips to attack the opponent's throat, abdomen, eyes and etc. body parts. There are four types of sweeping side punch, from using one finger to four fingers.
3. ↑ The Balloon Vine is climbing plant with circular, balloon-like fruits. The vine also grows small, clustered white flowers. The Japanese name for Balloon Vine is fusen kazura
4. ↑ lesbian
5. ↑ One of many Japanese terms used to refer to an elder brother or elder male cousin or by younger kids to refer to any elder male as a form of respect. Please note that the Japanese language carries different ways of referring to the same relative, each carrying different levels of affection, respect, etc. Therefore this has been left as it is.
6. ↑ A Noh mask is a mask used in Noh. Noh is a kind of classical arts in Japan which is a musical drama with performers wearing masks

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Story : Sadanatsu Anda
Illustrator : Shiromizakana
Translator : [Pudding321](#)
Editor : [Unkani](#), [Arczyx](#), [Kira0802](#)
PDF Maker : [Arczyx](#)